

most properly bespeaks the embodied condition of man; whilst, on the other hand, since touch is at its most perfect in man, of all animals, it connotes in us, where it is most truly itself, the human soul, intellectual yet essentially embodied, with its balancing of contrasts, its discernment, its submission to, and its gradual penetration of, the order of the world.

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

### KANT'S AGNOSTICISM<sup>1</sup>

I WOULD like to begin by reminding you of an episode in the history of modern philosophy in this country which is not altogether without significance, and that is the revolt against the Hegelian absolutism which one associates with such writers as Bosanquet and Edward Caird by a very powerful collection of thinkers at once philosophical and theological, of whom perhaps the best known in philosophical circles is the late Professor A. E. Taylor and in theological circles that profound and passionate writer Peter Taylor Forsyth. I mention Taylor and Forsyth together. I knew Taylor: I did not know Forsyth personally, but to judge from the latter's biography there was very little temperamental kinship between the two men. But both Taylor and Forsyth had this in common, that they welcomed Kant's intense moralism. I well remember Taylor saying to me: 'You know, MacKinnon, Kant is a very great moralist indeed. The Hegelian criticism of him is largely irrelevant. Hegel was a man without a conscience and could never understand anyone who took the moral struggle as seriously as Kant did'. Forsyth, too, in his writings found in Kant's intense moralism—his insistence on the inescapable demand of the moral law—a rock firm to withstand the moral frivolousness that he supposed to be ultimately implicit in the Hegelian attitude; and certainly if any of you have read Bosanquet's book, *Some Suggestions in Ethics* (a book well worth reading) you will agree, I think, that Bosanquet does leave little foothold for an ultimate moral seriousness—for the kind of almost existential engagement that seems involved in moral choice. It could be said of Forsyth—who was, I would remind you, a theologian and a very great theologian—that he sought above all else to secure a foothold in the world for the ultimate, not further analysable significance of the *fiat voluntas tua* of Gethsemane.

Why have I mentioned this episode? Because, apart from the

<sup>1</sup> The substance of a Paper read by Mr D. M. MacKinnon to the Oxford Aquinas Society on 21st February 1947.

intellectual quality of the writers and thinkers who played their part in it, it shows how great the power of Kant's thought can be. Taylor rejected Kant's theory of knowledge *in toto* and has published some very severe criticisms of the transcendental aesthetic's doctrines of the subjectivity of space and time: he accepted Kant as a moralist while he rejected him as a metaphysician. He went further than that—he insisted that any metaphysician worthy of the name must take account of the ultimacy of the moral point of view: we cannot be frivolous—this is typical of Taylor—with regard to choice. When we come to morality we come to something that is not a mere episode—not a mere fulfilment of a cluster of *prima facie* obligations—but is the very stuff of our existence. For Taylor as for Kant morality was not an episode; it was man engaged with the issues of his destiny. And although Taylor might have quarrelled with the way Kant developed his agnosticism, his own temper was one of the deepest hostility to any attempt to rob man's moral dignity of its ultimate significance. It was this sense of the significance of the moral life that made Taylor as implacably hostile to the contemporary Oxford deontologists as to the hedonists and utilitarians: both, he saw, were guilty of an *ignoratio elenchi* of which Kant was free. Forsyth welcomed the whole Kantian polemic against metaphysics. His own attitude to divinity was one of hostility to ontological metaphysics. But I suspect his repudiation was based in part on a misunderstanding.

Kant's agnosticism, of course, has a double strand. There is his criticism of the possibility of metaphysics—a criticism which is very well worth studying in detail, for it does contain some extremely good pieces of argument (e.g. one should not forget some of the things Kant says on the Paralogisms of Pure Reason on the subject of self-consciousness: they are a devastating commentary on certain sillinesses concerning the self such as the alleged establishment of the immortality of the soul from consideration of the self as a substance). There are some extremely acute pieces of discussion in the Dialectic, especially in Kant's account of the distinction between theoretical and a purely descriptive science. It is of course true that Kant does in the Dialectic argue frequently with great obscurity and only those who are familiar with the doctrines of the thoroughly second-rate metaphysicians whom he was criticising can hope to disentangle all his allusions: but it is possible for the non-specialist to see what he thought the whole thing was about. What is it exactly that he is criticising? He refers of course to cosmology, ontology, proofs for the immortality of the soul, arguments for the existence of God, and so on. What is it actually that he is attacking? To answer that

question one has to look at his theory of knowledge as a whole and the distinction he makes between reason and understanding round which his theory ultimately revolves.

Now Kant insisted that in perception there were at play two factors—sense and understanding—and a third factor that mediated between them—imagination. It is his view that our consciousness of an ordered world that comes to us through sensations is rendered possible through the fact that those sensations are taken up by and worked up into a consciousness that is active, dynamic, self-developing in accordance with its own nature, but which for all that is limited in two ways. Firstly Kant believes there are a certain number and only a certain number of ways in which this function of the understanding operates. It is upon this list of forms that his table of categories is based. Secondly, he holds that human understanding is limited in being discursive: it cannot out of its own resources posit the matter on which it has to work. That matter it has to receive from without. Its activity is to organise, combine and through imagination to supplement a manifold that is in its origin completely alien to it. It is Kant's view that we know what it is like to think, and that if we reflect on the activity of thinking we see that it expresses itself in this way.

He argues further that it is possible to see how through this activity of the understanding—combining, supplementing, working upon the given—the world of objects is revealed as possessing a kind of order in virtue simply of the very fact that such a world of objects can only be for such an understanding. He goes on, of course, to show that categories—forms of the understanding—are involved in the very possibility of objectivity, and our assurance that the world will continue to manifest the structural forms of the categories is guaranteed by the fact that only such a world as that we can hope to deal with. He really claims that unless the world manifests this sort of order it cannot be a world with which we can have dealings and such a world would not be a world for us. Kant's philosophy at this point is the philosophy of a charmed circle, i.e. a philosophy which believes that we can have only a relative certainty; we can be sure that the world has a form or order only in the sense that we can be sure that any other world would not be a world for us—of a non-causally ordered world, for example, we could say nothing.

It is impossible for any student of Kant's theory of knowledge to study that theory piece-meal. You cannot, for example, master his doctrine of space and time simply by a glance at his *Aesthetic*. I am not suggesting that that doctrine can be made wholly plausible,

but I do think that if you look at it as a whole it does not seem so wildly unpalatable as it appears, e.g., to Lord Russell<sup>1</sup> in his remarks on the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. Kant's theory has to be seen as a whole, and then it stands out as an extremely ingenious and not by any means unconvincing doctrine; and when seen as a whole it is revealed as an analysis of characteristically human rational activity inasmuch as it seems obvious that the forms of discursive understanding and the schematised categories are by Kant conceived as the way in which human beings make response to their world. The world must answer to their demand—that we know, for otherwise the world would not be our world as the object of our theoretical understanding: this of course is not to say that in absolutely no sense at all would it be our world, for our intellectual concern with the world is not the only concern we have. Kant's philosophy then is one of a charmed circle, and he is not claiming more than a relative validity for its categories. Again and again this agnostic strand shows itself in his theory of knowledge. Only at the end of the *Critique of Judgment* does he discuss the problem of the relation of an intuitive to a discursive understanding, but the problem is present throughout his whole work. We cannot claim that the world of Newtonian science is the only world; for it is certainly a world relative to us as sensible and intellectual beings and our whole thinking and knowing is conditioned by this duality.

Kant also recognises that men are beset by ultimate questions. They cannot easily rest. They ask questions which cannot be settled by any mere extension of their theoretical understanding. It seems as if they want to jump out of their cognitive skins—that reflecting on their situation as cognitive subjects they desire to see not from the point of view in which their nature holds them fast but absolutely. I think—though I am not certain that I am being fair to Kant here—that he conceived this vault as it were from objective knowledge which is relative to a point of view to a knowledge which is altogether unconditioned as the impulse common to all metaphysical speculation. As I understand him—and I am very far from sure that I do understand him—he sees the would-be metaphysician asking the questions, 'What am I', 'Whence came I?', 'What may I hope for—God, freedom and immortality?', as at first supposing that they could be answered by a mere extension of empirical information, through conversation with an expert in psychology or an extended study of the influence of heredity or environment or even a deep study of evolution, and then coming to recognise that the sort of understanding of which he was thinking was one that refused to be content with any such extension

<sup>1</sup> In his recently published *History of Western Philosophy*.

of merely relative consciousness. Kant seems to think of metaphysics as primarily an extension of theoretical questioning. True, Kant is the father of the logic of question and answer: but it seems to me that in metaphysics he conceives the goal of the metaphysician as a kind of extension of the theoretical satisfaction that takes place by a *metabasis eis allo genos*—a leap from the conditioned to the unconditioned, from the relative to the absolute.

Kant is interesting here because he is both right and wrong: he is right to say that if the metaphysician argues like that he hasn't got the feel of what he is about. Kant does see—and I think he is right—that proof because he sees how clearly akin the attitude which lies behind metaphysics is not a theoretical matter at all. To think of it in these terms would be to lapse into the purely 'aesthetic' point of view criticised by Kierkegaard. I am not suggesting for a moment that Kant would have been sympathetic with Kierkegaard: but there is a sense in which Kant does feel on edge in the presence of the treatment of metaphysics as merely theoretical. He recognises that there is a sense in which you cannot treat the problem of the existence of God as something which can be proved; that is the reason for the sympathetic manner in which he handles the physico-theological proof—he values that proof because he sees how clearly akin the attitude which lies behind the tendency to take it seriously is to the discipline of morality. But for all that he does see that when we concern ourselves with God, freedom and immortality we are conscious that they are not simply theoretical, not simply matters for the understanding, not simply ideas with whose validity we can concern ourselves. Yet he is wrong because he does not attend nearly closely enough to the possibility that perhaps he has got metaphysics wrong—that perhaps after all metaphysics is not concerned with the extension of the understanding—that the general paradigm in which he conceives metaphysics is perhaps one that caricatures what he is criticising.

Now Kant's theory, like all philosophical theories in the grand manner, concerned itself with the problem of the relative and the absolute, the conditioned and the unconditioned. It seems to me just possible that the verificationist position of Wittgenstein, of which Wisdom is in print the deepest and most self-conscious exponent, is the rational outcome of Kant's attitude to knowledge. But the problem of the relation of the relative and the absolute haunts his doctrine all along. His theory of knowledge is ultimately a theory which says that we can only know that which is conditioned by the attitude which we are compelled by the very nature of our human understanding to take up towards it if it is to be an object of knowledge. The theory has been well characterised as a kind of objec-

tive relativism. But at the same time there is the unconditioned in the background supplying a kind of context—a kind of penumbra—into which we are forever tempted to stray, and our wanderings have ever to be controlled by the discipline of the first critique.

So too in moral philosophy. Kant's moral philosophy is also continually beset by this problem of the relation of the absolute to the relative. I am not thinking simply of the relation of the categorical to the hypothetical imperative, about which a good deal of rubbish has been written; I am thinking of the good will and its relation to other kinds of good. Kant recognises that where the will is involved—where the stuff of a man's life is at stake—there he is convicted in the very necessity of his choices of affirming or failing to affirm the absolute in the relative. Kant's categorical imperative is not a principle from which men can deduce their duty in particular situations, but is the form the moral life itself embodied forth in the principles on which we choose. The good will, the treatment of ourselves and our fellows as ends and not as means, these things are not butterflies which we can capture and pin like so many moral prizes in a glass case; they are in effect the form of a life to which our nature impels us; and it is this form which is absolute, not the changing circumstances in which our sensuous and appetitive nature compels us to affirm it. It is interesting to observe how Kant's treatment of the conditioned and unconditioned in his theoretical and practical philosophy are related and contrasted. Kant's agnosticism is dualistic; you have it in his criticism of metaphysics, and you have it also in his ethics.

The post-Kantian idealists developed various forms of absolutism which refused to take seriously Kant's distinction between reason and understanding. The absolutists insisted, as Kant never did, that the relative by a dialectical movement passed into the absolute. Kant's agnosticism seems in their view to be indefensible; and yet, like cheerfulness, it keeps creeping back—and that among those who, like Taylor, believed that Kant was radically wrong in his theory of knowledge. Why? or how? I suspect it is because there are always those to whom a merely immanentist solution of the problem of the relation of the relative to the absolute will be impossible, for whom the problem will always be a real one, even though they recognise the assumption that underlies and to some extent vitiates the formulations of the problem that have marked the history of theoretical philosophy. Of course Kant was right in insisting that human consciousness was relative; the non-finality, the incompleteness, that always bedevilled its most cherished constructions—with these we are not at present concerned; but we are concerned to ask whether

perhaps if we look back at such incompleteness we find it to be as if we were not something that betrays us to a fruitless dissatisfaction, a continual looking for something beyond the horizon of our ken, but rather as something that sets us a problem. Supposing then we look at it not as something to be resolved but as something that gives us an insight into our own nature; suppose we suggest that the limitations of human knowledge are to be seen as the indirect expression of an ontological fact—indirect because others may come to this ontological relativity by more direct methods; supposing we allow reflection on the very character of human life—its half-light quality, its relativity to circumstance, its abstractness—to suggest to us not merely an extension of our theoretical understanding but an apprehension of ourselves as we are. To approach the problem thus would be to involve ourselves at once in ontological metaphysics. But one could plead that this is just what Kant does in his moral theory; for although he recognises the relativity of our moral situations he does see it is in the moral life we are engaged, in the to and fro of relative and absolute, of conditioned and unconditioned—and this at the level of willing and choosing, not speculative thinking.

Now would not the several strands of his doctrine come more closely together if the agnosticism of his theoretical philosophy were seen as the expression, albeit confused, of his possession of another aspect of the incompleteness of human consciousness that belongs inherently to the human situation? What is the starting point of metaphysics? Where do we come upon a relative that points beyond itself to an absolute? Where is it that we take hold on ultimate fragments of existence in such a way as in our taking hold on them to recognise that they point beyond themselves to an  $x$  that in its being analogically corresponds to them? Of course there are various ways of taking hold on relativity; and I suspect that if Thomism, with its profound conception of analogy, is to help and illuminate the perplexities today it must take account of those whose sense of incompleteness, of duality, lies more at the level of conduct than understanding. I suggest that perhaps if some of the profound remarks of Gilson on Thomist existentialism are to be assessed in their full dimension of depth it will be necessary to refer not simply to the kind of ontological situation that points indirectly to God as the unfathomable problem which the world sets but also to the expectations of those who wait for the Messiah. In his Gifford lectures on the Nature and Destiny of Man Dr Reinhold Niebuhr says that there is a profound, noticeable tendency among men to expect or not to expect the Messiah. The Christian tradition is the tradition of those who claim that the Messiah has come; and if in their metaphysical thinking they have concentrated

too much on a kind of natural purgation by faith and grace at the level of intellect they ought perhaps to remember those who are undergoing that purgation at the level of will. If Gilson is right, Thomism is a true existentialism, rational in temper, but still acknowledging the mysterious thing existence is—owning a God of Israel who proclaims himself I AM THAT I AM.

It is no accident that so great a writer as Forsyth should be antagonised by some of the metaphysical speculations in Christian theology—an antagonism which springs from the abstractions of the intellectualism of which these speculations are so often an expression. He turned to Kant's moralism as a prophylactic—and perhaps there was no need for him to do so; but it may be that though the Kantian has to find his way to a deeper agnosticism, he has something to teach the Thomist in the way he takes the reality of morality seriously.

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#### NEWSPAPERS

**C**ATHOLICS are bound to be interested in the hearings of the Royal Commission which will investigate the press. We have too many memories of the press treatment of Mexican and Russian persecutions to be able to sit on the fence as indifferent observers.

The motives which led to the demand in the House of Commons for such an investigation were varied but sufficiently strong to carry the day. Since then a United State delegate to UNESCO, Mr Chester Bowles, has demanded a world-wide inquiry into the forces behind the press, radio and films. He was reported to have stressed the need for an investigation into the influences which prevent the free flow of information. The British delegation supported Mr Bowles by asking for a fact-finding survey on circulations and the trends of popular periodicals and their control. The president of the sub-committee before which this question was raised considered that such an inquiry would have to concern itself with the question of false news.

It is something that this question is being raised. Even if no solution comes from either our own Royal Commission or the international investigation it will be something to have the facts checked and placed on authoritative record.

There are several aspects of the 'press problem'. They may be related or they may not. The popular discussion of the subject has been on the monopoly tendencies. We do not need to worry about proving this to be of less importance than the problem of the contents