

Reviews

RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY ed. by Martin Warner. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 31. Cambridge University Press, 1992. Pp. vi + 155.

These ten papers on various topics in the philosophy of religion arose from a Royal Institute of Philosophy conference held in Warwick in 1991. All of the contributors are well known and respected in the field. Renford Bambrough and Roger Trigg discuss 'reason and faith'; Herbert McCabe, O.P., and Cyril Barrett, S.J., discuss 'mysticism and logic'. (Are these two titles for the same debate?) Michael Durrant and Peter Geach spar on 'the meaning of "God"', and Martin Warner and Peter Lamarque on 'language, interpretation and worship'. Finally there is a discussion of the relationship between 'religion and ethics' from Stewart Sutherland and Phillips Griffiths. The book begins with a longish introduction to these symposia by the editor. The reviewer of such a multifarious assemblage of ideas can perhaps be excused for concentrating on two themes that interested him.

Renford Bambrough's conclusion is this neat antithesis: 'There is no faith where we are conscious of being in possession of conclusive argument or evidence, but there is also no faith where there is nothing at all that counts as evidence or argument in favour of the conclusion in which we have faith' (Martin Warner, ed.: *Religion and Philosophy*, paperback edition, 31). *En route* to this conclusion, Bambrough reviews a number of positions—William James', Sartre's, Pascal's—which, he argues, are characterised by their inability to allow for reasons, of any sort, for religious or metaphysical belief, of any sort. It would have been interesting if Bambrough had mirrored this by looking at some positions from the opposite end of the spectrum: some believers who claim that there can be conclusive reasons for belief. This might make it clearer why we should agree with the first half of his antithesis, that 'There is no faith where we are conscious of being in possession of conclusive argument or evidence'. In what sense is this true?

Suppose a believer comes to think it *absolutely proved* that (say) Jesus rose from the dead. Not unnaturally he is delighted by this remarkable discovery, and attends to Mass and his private devotions with new zeal because of it. Well, has the discovery somehow invalidated his belief? If so, we want to know how. Has it rendered his belief a *non-religious* belief? I see no reason to say that, except the question-begging one that 'belief and historical certainty are mutually exclusive or fundamentally different'. (So Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 32: 'Historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief'.) Or has the discovery made the believer *presumptuous*: he no longer trusts in God or leans on Him because, *knowing* now what before he only guessed at, he no longer has the same *need* of God? Surely such a discovery would have the opposite effect: it would make the believer *all the more* dependent on God, not less.

Or is *this* the problem: that if the believer is right and it's absolutely

proved that God exists, then everyone has prudential reason to believe in God as soon as they have mastered the proof—so that faith is no longer a *virtue*? This too is an unconvincing suggestion, for two reasons. (1) This implausibly sharp distinction between 'prudential' and 'moral' reasons for doing anything, and in particular for believing in God, is better simply dropped. (P. Geach, *God and the Soul*. 127–129.) (2) The New Testament writers seem to think that the virtue of faith means an attitude of trust in God, not the holding of any particular doctrine on whatever evidence, weak or strong. As the author of *James* points out, 'The devils too believe in God, and tremble'. (*James* 2.19. The Greek is *phrissousin*, 'their hair stands on end!'). Right doctrine is necessary for the virtue of faith, but it is not sufficient. Or there is that favourite text of Aquinas's, *Romans* 1.20: 'His invisible power and divinity is seen, being understood from the things He has made, so that they are without excuse'. This is a long way from the picture of faith in which we believe in the absence of evidence. The picture seems to be that God's existence, so far from being only assertible after a leap of faith, is an intuitively obvious fact which can only be *denied* by culpable self-deception. So (the argument would go) since anyone can see that God exists—at least if they are prepared to stop pretending they can't—there is no *virtue* about seeing that He exists. So the virtue of faith cannot be primarily about this. Perhaps it is about the aforementioned attitude of trust instead.

I conclude that better reasons than those suggested here are needed for Bambrough's acceptance of the common view that 'There is no faith where we are conscious of being in possession of conclusive argument or evidence'. My complaint is that this view begins by making a virtue of a necessity, and ends by making a vice of a possibility. Since we find it hard to feel convinced that God is there all the time, we in our necessity conclude that the virtue of faith must be simply a matter of heroically holding on to right doctrine even when we see no reason to do so. And then we decide on *that* basis that there must be something wrong with anyone who finds it a possibility to hold on to right doctrine for *good* (or at any rate strong) reasons. This typical modern predicament is, I submit, (a) topsy turvy, (b) nothing to do with the virtue of faith, and (c) Kant's fault (but that's another story).

Father Cyril Barrett, like most of the contributors to the volume, is a Wittgenstein fan. This leads his thought into some surprising convolutions in his paper on 'Mysticism and Logic'. For example, he tells us (p. 69) that 'genuinely to believe in the Incarnation and Redemption is mystical. It flies in the face of common sense and logic'. Now Wittgensteinians make an absolute division between the mystical and the ordinary-factual, and hold it a complete impossibility that statements in these categories should contradict each other or even be brought to a meeting point. Given this, Father Barrett's remark raises an interesting possibility. There seems no good reason, on his view, why one might not simultaneously hold both a 'mystical' view about the Resurrection (as, say, that it happened) and a 'non-mystical' view about the Resurrection (as, say, that it did not happen). To naive eyes like my own, this looks like a contradiction. But since, for the Wittgensteinians, the realms of the

mystical and the ordinary-factual are so securely insulated from each other, for them it apparently is not.

The division which Barrett and others make between the non-mystical and the mystical perhaps deserves a little more exploration. In what sense does believing in the Resurrection, or the Incarnation, 'fly in the face of common sense and logic'? Common sense and logic seem rather different faculties, by the way; but what do they have to say about these doctrines? Common sense does not seem to rule out the possibility of God's acting in remarkable ways, such as raising people from the dead for example. After all, that's what God is supposed to be like: remarkable. What about logic? It is hard to see anything *logically* weird or improper about the idea of God's raising someone from the dead. There is, of course, something scientifically weird about it. But that is hardly news, and anyway, we are not bound to insist on omnipresent consistency in science as we are in logic.

Rather differently, Father Barrett tells us (p.64) that the place of mystical belief 'is *not to be logical*, but not to be illogical either'. But why think that this feature is peculiar to mystical or religious beliefs? My beliefs that 'cats like cream' and that 'St.Giles' is a street in Oxford' are, for all I can see, 'not logical, but not illogical either' in just the same way as are my beliefs that 'God made the world' and that 'Jesus was raised from the dead'. For *mere logic* can say nothing for or against any of these beliefs. They are consistent factual propositions which, presumably, are either true or false.

Differently again we find this claim, which comes straight from Wittgenstein: 'The nature of ethical and religious expressions, expressions of absolute value, is that they are essentially nonsensical. They run against the limits of language and attempt to say the unsayable' (p.63). But what *kind* of 'expressions of absolute value' did Wittgenstein claim were essentially nonsensical? If Wittgenstein really thought that claims like 'God exists' and 'Eating people is wrong' were *nonsensical* then, I submit, Wittgenstein was wrong. (That the great man might on occasion have been *mistaken* about some things is, of course, a suggestion which will scandalise his faithful disciples. So much the worse for them.) Until one has become calloused by Wittgensteinianism, it is going to seem perfectly obvious that 'God exists' and 'Eating people is wrong' are *not* nonsensical. These claims might be false claims, of course; but they are *claims all right*.

If modern Wittgensteinians want to retain the notion that there are some expressions of absolute value which involve us in 'beating against the bars of language' ('Wittgenstein's Lecture on ethics', *Philosophical Review* 1965, 26), they had better find some more plausible candidates for the role of such essentially meaningless expressions than my examples 'God exists' and 'Eating people is wrong'. What would do the trick? Well, perhaps they could take something like this expression:

'The ending meant by death does not mean being-there's being at an end, but rather a being towards the end of this entity. Death is a way to be, which being-there appropriates as soon as it exists.'

(Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*), Tübingen: Niemeyer Verlag, 1972, 1245.)

For all I know, this may well be 'an expression of absolute value' in the sense required by Wittgensteinians like Father Barrett. Unlike 'Eating people is wrong' (etc.), it does at any rate seem nonsensical. This raises the rather exciting prospect that the Wittgensteinians' analysis of all expressions of absolute value might actually apply to some of those expressions, namely at least the ones uttered by Heideggerians. We eagerly await further developments in this line.

These are reflections on some loose ends in a book which makes a virtue out of generating intriguingly new lines of thought, and so, inevitably, generates a fair number of such loose ends in the process. Important and interesting debates have been initiated or interestingly continued, by these ten essays, and I recommend them to the reader's further scrutiny.

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WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS? A COMPARISON WITH GRAECO-ROMAN BIOGRAPHY by Richard A. Burrige. *CUP* 1992, pp. xiii, 292, + 35, \$54.95.

This study is presented in two parts. The first part contains an historical survey, a discussion of what genre is, a description of ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman biographies, and an evaluation of recent debate. Burrige concludes that ancient biography is a type of writing which occurred naturally among groups of people who had formed around a certain charismatic teacher or leader, seeking to follow after him, that its major purpose and function was didactic or philosophical polemic and conflict, and that ancient biography was a genre capable of flexibility, adaptation and growth.

Part Two argues that the gospels are to be understood as belonging to the genre of Graeco-Roman biography. Generic features of examples of Graeco-Roman biographies from the fourth century BCE to the third century CE are analysed in chapters 5 and 7. Burrige concludes that the major determining feature of the genre is concentration on one individual. Some concentrate on the subject's deeds and the chronology of his life, others focus on certain topics, teachings or virtues in a non-chronological manner. The Graeco-Roman biographical genre is signalled at the outset by using the subject's name in the title or the opening features.

Chapter 8 examines the synoptic gospels. They are shown to share the following general features with Graeco-Roman biographies: the introduction of the subject at the beginning; a large proportion of the verbs with Jesus as the subject; the mode of presentation: prose narrative of a fairly continuous nature; the size of each work; the chronological character of the accounts, with insertions of topical material; the focus on one individual; the combination of stories, anecdotes, sayings and speeches; the freedom to select and edit sources to produce the desired portrait of the subject; the display of character through deeds and words; the subject as the focus of the settings; shared topics: ancestry, birth, boyhood and education, great deeds, virtues displayed in action, death and consequences; a serious