

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 8 | Issue 1

Article 10

1-1-1991

Kennedy, THOMISTIC PAPERS IV

Michael L. Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Peterson, Michael L. (1991) "Kennedy, THOMISTIC PAPERS IV," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol8/iss1/10>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

MacIntyre's liberal-bashing provocative. Thus I recommend the book both for its rich historical narrative, which is interesting quite apart from the philosophical lessons MacIntyre tries to extract from it, and as a useful antidote to liberal complacency, which lingers in academic circles despite the fact that liberalism has fallen on hard times in the political arena.

NOTES

1. John Rawls, "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer 1985), p. 225.

2. John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

Thomistic Papers IV, edited by Leonard A. Kennedy. Houston: Center for Thomistic Studies, 1988. 207 pp. \$23.95 Cloth; \$12.95 Paper.

MICHAEL L PETERSON, Asbury College.

This book is mandatory reading for those interested in the contemporary discussion of the epistemology of religion. Leonard Kennedy, editor of the previous two volumes in the *Thomistic Papers* series, has assembled a group of very capable Thomist scholars dedicated to the defense of Thomistic natural theology, which is criticized in *Faith and Rationality* (Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds. 1983). In this spirited fourth volume of *Thomistic Papers*, "Thomistic epistemologists" Henry Veatch, Henri DuLac, Thomas Sullivan, Dennis McNerny, Richard Connell, Joseph Boyle, and Thomas Russman sally forth against the "Reformed Epistemologists" in *Faith and Rationality*. Most chapters in *Thomistic Papers IV* target the chapters in *Faith and Rationality* by Plantinga and Wolterstorff; one chapter scrutinizes Alston's work; a small part of one chapter comments briefly on one of Mavrodes' stories and a part on Marsden's work. This review discusses all of the chapters in the book, but gives slightly greater emphasis to those by Veatch, McNerny, and Boyle.

Henry Veatch sets the stage for discussion by devoting most of his lengthy chapter to the analysis of Plantinga's piece "Reason and Belief in God." Veatch affirms at the outset the essential agreement between Thomistic and Reformed thinkers: that one chief aim of Christian philosophy is the exhibition of the rationality of the Christian faith. The great differences lie in how the two groups of scholars conceive of this project.

Veatch correctly understands that Plantinga's objection to natural theology is that it rests on classical foundationalism and evidentialism. However, he mistakenly attributes to Plantinga an understanding of foundationalism which holds that all foundational propositions are self-evident and then tries to exempt Aquinas from that brand of foundationalism by indicating that he recognizes empirical knowledge. Actually, Plantinga defines classical foundationalism as the view that a well-formed noetic structure contains propositions which are known directly by virtue of being self-evident or evident to the senses or incorrigible. Evidentialism is the view that all beliefs must be either foundational propositions or derived inductively or deductively from foundational propositions. According to the evidentialist model, religious beliefs must be supported by either deductive or inductive inference from foundational beliefs. Providing such support has typically been taken to be the task of traditional natural theology.

While admitting that strict evidentialism is much too rigorous to make sense of religious believing as well as many other legitimate forms of believing, Veatch takes strong exception to Plantinga's attack on foundationalism. Against Plantinga, he argues that foundationalism is not a faulty picture of knowledge, that not all versions of foundationalism are self-referentially incoherent, and that a feasible version of foundationalism can be constructed.

Veatch later criticizes Plantinga's positive alternative to foundationalism—the view that a person can be rationally justified in accepting “basic propositions” without inferential support from other propositions and that such propositions, in appropriate circumstances, are delivered to one's consciousness by “belief dispositions” (e.g., memory, perception, and even a sense of divinity) which are built into our human noetic equipment. Hence, Plantinga can say that belief in God can be epistemically basic, although it does not meet classical foundationalist and evidentialist requirements.

In responding to Plantinga, Veatch makes two main points. First, he argues that Plantinga's notion of belief-producing mechanisms or belief dispositions plays into an elementary confusion of reasons with causes, a confusion which could render most if not all of human belief formation a purely nonrational process (pp. 40-46). Second, Veatch accuses Plantinga of inconsistency in advocating that a basic proposition is one which a person would be entirely *rational* in accepting although there is no *reason* whatsoever for accepting it (p. 52).

Veatch's second point here betrays an outright misunderstanding of Plantinga's distinction between having rational warrant for a belief (i.e., epistemic justification) and having reasons for that belief (i.e., discursive arguments), a misunderstanding which surfaces in various ways in several subsequent chapters. However, this misunderstanding is partially explicable along the following lines. Both sides seem to construe the concept of giving

a reason so narrowly that they confine it, say, to the complex arguments of the Five Ways. Since there are identifiable contexts in which a person can be entirely rational in believing in God without being able to supply any semblance of natural theology, the Reformed thinkers hold that we need not give a reason for believing in God. Yet, since the Thomist thinkers are convinced that there must be a fundamental sense in which we can give a reason for belief in God, they confidently defend natural theology and tend to characterize their opponents as advocating willy-nilly believing.

Obviously, there is room for a more thorough and sympathetic understanding of the Reformed epistemologists' case before clear battle lines can be drawn. The irony which emerges from Veatch's misinterpretation here is that his essay, as distinct from the others in the book, is somewhat sarcastic in tone, often suggesting that Plantinga and other Reformed epistemologists simply misinterpret Aquinas and his intellectual followers.

DuLac's very brief chapter tries to clarify various issues which he finds confused in *Faith and Rationality*. For instance, DuLac also rehearses the standard Thomistic view on the respective roles of the natural intellect and divine grace in coming to religious belief, insisting that for one to believe in God because of the evidence is not necessarily to preempt his or her having legitimate faith—a point which he takes his Reformed opponents to have missed. While DuLac makes some strides in the Thomist-Calvinist controversy, he oversimplifies Plantinga's position somewhat and fails to explore several allusions in Plantinga's writings to the contexts in which giving arguments for belief in God is acceptable.

In a very interesting essay, Sullivan does not mount a frontal assault on the position of Plantinga, Wolterstorff, and company so much as he seeks to go further than they do in the rebuttal of anti-theistic critics. Sullivan explains that these critics maintain that we have an intellectual obligation—indeed, an ethical obligation—to believe only those propositions for which we have adequate evidence. Plantinga *et alia* respond by arguing that it can be within our epistemic rights, and thus ethically permissible, to believe that God exists as a properly basic proposition. Borrowing heavily from Cardinal Newman, Sullivan declares not merely that it can be within our epistemic rights to believe, but that we can actually have an ethical obligation to believe in the existence of God, if so believing is indispensable to some worthy end (p. 91). Sullivan does not discuss, however, how his case, which assumes that we can choose to believe for the sake of worthy ends, relates to Plantinga's suggestion that our beliefs may not be under our volitional control.

McInerny's chapter is a direct reply to William Alston's article "Christian Experience and Christian Practice" in *Faith and Rationality*. Alston's burden is to consider whether and in what specific way Christian experience (i.e., the experience of leading the Christian life, broadly and ecumenically con-

ceived) makes some contribution to the rationality of Christian belief. Developing his case around the concept of an epistemic practice, Alston focuses on the suggestive analogies between what might be called Perceptual Practice (PP) and Christian Practice (CP): just as we have the practice of taking perceptual experience as a basis for perceptual beliefs, there is the practice among Christians of taking Christian experience as a basis for Christian beliefs.

McInerny counters that the significant disanalogies between PP and CP render Alston's case unconvincing. Among the major dissimilarities, according to McInerny, are the way belief functions within each practice (in CP belief seems constitutive of the practice whereas in PP no antecedent belief is necessary), the function or end of the practices involved (PP produces or establishes a belief, but CP confirms a belief or set of beliefs already held), and the kind of knowledge involved (in PP mere "brute sensation" forms the basis for judgments, while in CP we have highly interpreted sensations, or, better, "ideologically interpreted sensations" (p. 112)). McInerny's own positive position is revealed in his distinction between the two kinds of knowledge, saying that perceptual knowledge is purely natural whereas Christian faith is supernaturally donated to the believer, a divinely bestowed gift which surpasses what our natural noetic powers can deliver. He thus contends that Alston mistakenly explains the Christian epistemic practice in terms of our natural powers when a supernaturalistic explanation is more adequate.

While leading the reader through some new criticisms and suggestions not anticipated in Alston's important and provocative work, McInerny's piece has not definitively laid to rest Alston's contention that there is a significant sense in which Christian Practice is indeed rational or is a justified epistemic practice. First, his attempt to drive a wedge between PP and CP by arguing that the former relies on uninterpreted sensation whereas the latter relies on ideological or world view commitments deserves further discussion. But this tactic initially seems naive about much of the contemporary literature on the conceptual conditioning of perceptual as well as other kinds of experience. Second, his introduction of supernatural grace into the matter—while neither Alston nor any other adherent to orthodox, historical Christianity would rule out its role—shifts the discussion of just how much our natural epistemic procedures can deliver to an entirely different issue which Alston did not intend to address.

Connell's chapter is an attack on another aspect of what is perceived to be the Plantinga-Wolterstorff position. Connell contends that the Reformed epistemologists' rejection of classical foundationalism and advocacy of the claim that rational beliefs is "person-specific" (p. 136) lands their theory of rationality in an insidious form of epistemic relativism and distorts their interpretations of the theistic proofs offered by Aquinas. Connell explains that the Five Ways are merely summaries of more lengthy and sophisticated

arguments which are meant only for those who are philosophically adept. Of course, merely to bolster the Five Ways with background information is not to refute the accusation that the whole foundationalist-oriented project of traditional natural theology is a misguided endeavor.

Boyle's chapter follows a two-fold strategy: to defend something like the classical foundationalist's criterion for basicity and to rebut Plantinga's argument that belief in God is properly basic in a way not accounted for by this criterion. Boyle argues that the foundationalist criterion is neither false nor self-referentially incoherent, as Plantinga charges. Focusing on ancient and medieval versions of foundationalism (as distinct from modern versions of foundationalism which include an incorrigibility requirement), Boyle employs the concept of the "immediately evident" to capture the central conviction of the view (p. 178). He argues that nothing could be more reasonable than to require that basic propositions in the foundation of a rational noetic structure be immediately evident. Moreover, Boyle argues that the requirement that basic propositions be immediately evident is a criterion which itself seems self-evident. Thus, Plantinga is also incorrect in claiming that the foundationalist criterion is self-referentially incoherent by virtue of its not being either a basic proposition or supported by basic propositions.

Boyle then turns to Plantinga's claim that belief in God, although it does not meet the criterion of classical foundationalism, is properly basic. In the end, Boyle resorts to his concept of the immediately evident as the hallmark of basicity and says that "Plantinga gives no reason for thinking that belief in God is immediately evident, and does not argue that such a belief can be properly basic even though it is not immediately evident" (p. 183). It is not clear, however, that Boyle's appraisal rests on a sufficiently thorough appreciation of Plantinga's treatment of proper basicity. For one thing, Plantinga's analysis of basicity certainly makes the point that properly basic propositions are not known on the basis of other propositions. And his treatment of belief in God putatively shows that it need not be known on the basis of other propositions. Now, surely, being-known-but-not-being-known-on-the-basis-of-other-propositions is roughly equivalent to Boyle's concept of being-immediately-evident. For another thing, Plantinga's fuller exposition of the idea of cognitive faculties (with their attendant belief dispositions) and of the idea of appropriate circumstances (with their role of conferring justification on beliefs whose formation they influence) ought to be taken as part of his overall argument.

Russman's chapter attempts to establish that all mainline Christian thought must be foundationalist in character and that "Reformed Epistemology" is quite a foundationalist enterprise, contrary to the way in which it officially styles itself. The great gulf between Reformed epistemology and Thomistic epistemology, as Russman sees it, consists in their very different versions of

foundationalism. The real issue between the Reformed epistemologists and the classical foundationalists whom they attack is not whether foundationalism is an adequate theory, but what sorts of propositions can be in the foundations of a rational noetic structure and what conditions for basicity shall be invoked. Points in Russman's piece for further discussion include his imputing to the Reformed epistemologists a doctrine of innate ideas and his claiming that they advocate an incontrovertible divine guarantee of our knowledge claims about God.

Thomistic Papers IV is rich and profitable reading. Given this reviewer's sympathy with the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, it was especially enjoyable to peruse what appears to be the first major collaborative statement of the Thomistic critique of Reformed epistemology. The reader will likely arrive at a mixed assessment of the book, finding it strong on some points and somewhat weak on others. For example, the Thomist authors succeed in casting doubt on the Reformed epistemologists' presentation of Aristotle and Aquinas, and in pressing for a discussion of what it means to have reasons for belief. However, the Thomist authors sometimes seem to misunderstand precisely what their Reformed counterparts are saying and thus risk unnecessary polarization. In conclusion, all of us should hope that the Thomist-Calvinist dialogue—carried one important step further by the present volume—will continue.

Religious Belief and The Will, by **Louis P. Pojman**. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986. Pp. xiii and 258. \$32.50 in cloth.

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF, Yale University.

Pojman's discussion is divided into two parts, of approximately equal length. The first is a survey of various positions taken in the history of Western philosophy on the relation of belief and the will, with special emphasis on religious belief. The second is a systematic discussion of the issues raised in the first part. To the best of my knowledge there is no other book-length discussion of this topic—this in spite of the fact that most major philosophers have taken up or assumed positions on the matter, and in spite of the fact that since the 19th century the relation of belief to the will has been the focus of sharp, and generally indecisive, debate.

Anyone who has studied closely what some figure from the history of philosophy had to say on the relation of the will to belief will, I think, find Pojman's discussion of the philosopher falling within his or her area of expertise not very satisfactory. This for two reasons. Pojman's overall interpretation of the philosophers he treats are, in all cases, conventional treat-