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Mitchell, FAITH AND CRITICISM

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say, its negative condition is not met. Causality reigns. Compatibilists allow for freedom *if* the causes at issue are within the agent. But that proviso strikes libertarians (and others) as empty. Still, what are we to make of actions that are "authored" by a libertarian self both metaphysically and historically unimaginable?

For Pinckaers, we *become* free. We do so in becoming free *from* what impedes the cooperation of reason and will and thus free *for* the good which attracts us. So we are neither determinists nor libertarians. But are we compatibilists? Surely not in a Humean sense; perhaps not in any sense. What, then, is the Christian view in the modern context? How do we engage the established disorder if our identity is unclear? *La lotta continua.*

Faith and Criticism, by **Basil Mitchell**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Pp. 173. \$29.95 (Cloth)

WILLIAM P. ALSTON, Syracuse University

The central problem dealt with in this book is whether openness to criticism is compatible with the strong commitment essential to religious faith. Mitchell approaches the problem by contrasting what he calls *liberals* and *conservatives* in theology. Evincing keen awareness of the ambiguity of these terms, he stipulates the following understanding.

...within all the mainstream churches there is a sharp division between those who take it for granted that Christian theology should be studied critically with the aid of all the resources of modern scholarship and with due attention to all that is received as knowledge in the modern world [*liberals*], and those who resist this trend as destructive of the historic faith of Christians [*conservatives*] (1)

Mitchell's presentation of this contrast is notable for bringing out the way in which fundamentalists and radical thinkers like D. Z. Phillips share a rejection of the possibility that extra-religious knowledge could overthrow Christian faith, despite their very different versions of this conviction.

The central issue of the book then emerges from a conservative criticism of liberal theology.

Christian faith is unconditional. It demands our complete and whole-hearted allegiance. But to allow Christian belief to be exposed to criticism implies that criticism might turn out to be fatal. Once it is allowed that faith is, in principle, vulnerable to criticism, its character is bound to change. In place of the total commitment which is demanded of Christians we have a faith which is tentative and provisional. (4)

Though Mitchell takes this argument very seriously, and points out that the difficulty arises within liberal theology itself (since the liberal is also concerned to defend the faith), he is primarily concerned to rebut this alleged incompatibility of full-blooded faith and openness to criticism.

His most crucial move is a challenge to the antithesis of faith and rationality that is presupposed in the above argument. "My claim will be that faith, far from being the antithesis of rationality, is an essential requirement of any kind of effective intellectual endeavour." (10) He begins his defense of this claim by alluding to John Henry Newman's critique of Locke's conception of reason as the proportioning of belief to the evidence. Though he gives a fine exposition of several of Newman's points, the one on which he lays most emphasis is the following.

If our appreciation of evidence and our assessment of the conclusions that follow from it is generally tacit and implicit, and if the process of reasoning is conducted within a framework of assumptions which are to some extent influenced by the individual's entire character and personality, a certain stability over time in these assumptions is necessary.

In this connection he cites the stress people like Thomas Kuhn have put on the point that science would be impossible if hypotheses and theories were rejected every time some contrary evidence turns up. "Hence, scientists operate with what has been called a 'principle of tenacity', in virtue of which they do not let go of their fundamental beliefs when things get difficult, but rather persevere in the hope, or - shall we say? - the faith, that the problem will eventually be resolved." (18) And he goes on to suggest that this tenacity is even more marked and more important in the human sciences and in the humanities than in the physical sciences about which Kuhn was speaking. Moreover, "...it is even more obviously true of world-views or philosophies of life.... For these are not only practical, but also comprehensive." (27) In addition, they involve not only the pursuit of truth but also the search for salvation, where the need for continuity and stability of one's basic principles and orientation are still more central desiderata.

Thus Mitchell's basic line is that the need for a balance between unconditional commitment and openness to criticism is not at all peculiar to religious faith, but is a pervasive feature of our intellectual and practical life. But since he is plumping for a balance, he is careful not to stress the value of stability to the exclusion of testing against knowledge and experience.

These results can, of course, be straightforwardly applied to the case of Christian faith, and to religious faith more generally. Yet in Chapter 3, "Faith and Criticism as Interdependent," Mitchell give careful consideration to ways in which the religious case is, or might be thought to be, special. Thus the conservative "may argue that Christian faith demands an altogether greater degree of commitment to a particular historical tradition than is required by these secular analogies." (51) "Christian faith cannot be a purely individual matter but involves sharing the creed of

the Christian Church; and the Church itself accepts the authority of the Scriptures and of the Christian tradition more definitely and more formally than is the case with these secular counterparts." (52). Mitchell's response to this is two-pronged, and it is initially unclear just how he takes the two prongs to be related. (1) He points out that genuine Christian faith is not "simply repeating what is said in the Bible without any attempt to understand it". (54) It rather involves "a process of subordinating some parts of the Bible to others". (55) Moreover, "we ought surely to expect that God's truth will transcend our understanding at any particular time and indeed prove inexhaustible." (55) Such considerations lead him to the conclusion that "the conservative's emphasis on the primacy of divine revelation and the distinctive character of faith in it does not detract from the liberal's insistence upon the need for criticism. Rather the two are interdependent. Criticism, to have any point, requires a strong tradition whose claims to truth are seriously advanced and will not readily be surrendered. Faith requires that the tradition which is being upheld should be tested in the fires of criticism." (63) "It is only by exposure to criticism that the full implications of our faith can be increasingly understood, and it belongs to that faith to trust that it can withstand criticism and be illuminated by it." (64).

(2) The second prong involves the distinction between faith as "believing that" and faith as "trusting reliance upon God". It is in this second sense, he says "that faith is indeed unconditional. As Christians, we are bound to maintain our trust in God's goodness and mercy no matter what dangers and difficulties confront us." (65).

But though these points look quite different, Mitchell relates them as follows.

...the unconditional nature of our trust in God, of our faith in him in that sense, does have a bearing on the nature of our belief in him, in the sense of 'belief that', and our willingness to expose it to criticism. For it assumes that all truth is God's truth and that, if we are honest in our search for truth and at the same time loyal to the signs we have been given, we shall not ultimately be misled.... Those of us who are, in the sense I have given the word, liberals in theology are, I think, entitled to ask which attitude shows the greater trust in God, that which refuses to submit our traditional formulations of belief to criticism, or that which is confident that, if we put them to the test of reason and experience, we shall be led in the end to a fuller understanding of them, and a firmer conviction of their truth. (66)

Thus the unconditional trust in God can lead us to the interdependence of (propositional) faith and criticism we found in the first prong.

The above takes us through only three of the eight chapters of the book, but they are the ones that contain Mitchell's answer to what he highlights as his basic problem. In the remainder we find insightful comments on various subsidiary issues. In Ch. 4 the author casts warranted aspersions on the idea that Hume and Kant have put the quietus

on giving significant reasons for Christian belief, construed as making factual claims - natural or supernatural. In Ch. 5 he addresses what he terms a "secondary theme for this book", "an inevitable tension between those who want above all to hold fast to traditional beliefs and make sure that nothing of value is lost even at the risk of a clash with 'modern knowledge'; and those who want above all to proclaim a faith that is relevant to our times even at the risk of sacrificing some elements of traditional doctrine". (88) Mitchell declares that "Both emphases are necessary and it is a tragedy for the Church that the two should so often be in uncomprehending conflict" (88), a sentiment as appropriate to American mainline denominations as to the Church of England. In arguing that the two emphases are compatible Mitchell declares his faith "that the Christian tradition embodies a message of such a kind that it can retain its identity while subject to revision in the light of developing knowledge". (91) In developing this idea he evinces a keen sensitivity to the difficulties of striking the right balance, but he steadfastly maintains that the attempt to do so is eminently worthwhile. Thus, in commenting on the aversion of "progressives" to biblical fundamentalism, he suggests a middle position.

It might be the case that, although the New Testament does not contain a set of entirely consistent teachings, ready-made, so to speak, it does nevertheless possess an overall coherence which becomes steadily more apparent the more it is studied and meditated upon...it would not, indeed, be possible for Christian thinkers at any given time in history to predict just how a particular doctrine would be interpreted, and rightly interpreted, at some future period, but it would be possible to distinguish, at that later period, between what was a genuine development of the original message and what was a corruption or dilution of it...of course there is no simple set of rules by which such a discrimination can be made, and in that sense, there is no guarantee of correctness...but, as we have seen, the same is true in any important sphere of human enquiry. (93-94)

This is then followed by an acute criticism of the conceptual relativism according to which people in one period are unable to so much as understand what those of another period are saying.

The last three chapters apply the foregoing discussion to increasingly concrete and practical concerns - ethics, religious education, and the place of the established church in Britain.

What are we to say of all this? I must confess that Mitchell's treatment is so judicious, so eminently sensible, so beautifully a specimen of the Anglican *via media* that this partisan of the *via media* can find little with which to seriously disagree. I will register only one significant reservation. The strength of the analogies Mitchell draws between religious belief and other belief systems, vis-a-vis the stability-openness contrast, is a function of the extent to which the the case for, e.g., traditional Christian belief is anything like as strong as the case for received

views in the sciences, the humanities, history, and the like. This is something Mitchell does not address in this book, though he has elsewhere, particularly in *The Justification of Religious Belief*. But we should realize that the issue lies just below the surface.

Otherwise, one might complain that the middle ground he favors is often characterized too unspecifically to give much useful guidance. Where we find partisans of opposite extremes it is always plausible to suggest that there must be some mediating position that accommodates the valid insights of both sides while avoiding the excesses of each. But actually doing the job is another matter. I have quoted Mitchell as presenting, on one or another issue, some suggestions as to the form a middle position might take, but one may be pardoned for wanting some more substantial working out of such a position. But such a reaction would amount to wishing the author had written another book instead. What Mitchell has set out to do in this book is to address fundamental questions concerning the relation of faith and criticism, not develop a formulation of the faith that results from the actual deployment of such criticism. This is, if you like, meta-critical faith, not the first-level article. As with all meta-inquiries, many will be dissatisfied with the level of abstractness it exhibits. But long philosophical experience clearly indicates that meta-investigations can guide and illuminate first level work in the trenches. So let us be thankful for the wise counsel contained in this book and profit from it when we undertake tasks of the sort upon which it is a reflection.

Making Sense of Your Freedom: Philosophy for the Perplexed by **James W. Felt**. S.J. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv and 110. \$28.95 (cloth); \$9.95 (paper).

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Professor Felt's work is a remarkably clear and sometimes brilliant exercise in what William James called popular philosophy. James himself often wrote or lectured in that mode, and probably nowhere more brilliantly than in his "The Dilemma of Determinism," which Felt cites and quotes. Felt's book, in its clarity, wit, and the vividness of its concrete examples, reminds me of that side of James. But to speak of *Making Sense of Your Freedom* as an exercise in popular philosophy means only that it is not addressed solely to an audience of professional philosophers. The book is clearly the product of a subtle mind, one that has managed to say something striking about many aspects of this difficult and important problem. The book has an admirable unity and pace, and it can be read with profit by professionals working in the fields of philosophy and religion.

The freedom that interests Felt, he tells us in chapter 1, manifests itself in the very act of choosing: it is, he says, the "characteristic or quality of a human act, specifically of the interior act of deciding to respond in some