Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

1-1-2001

Helm, FAITH AND UNDERSTANDING

Sandra Menssen

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

Secondly, I am not convinced that on Aquinas's view the motives or signs of credibility are as extrinsic to the act of faith (merely disposing one to be attentive) as Jenkins' interpretation claims. He certainly is right in rejecting the naturalist interpretation, but on Aquinas's view it seems that the light of faith enables one to see or appreciate the signs of credibility themselves. Jenkins is right that this often occurs by an immediate, non-discursive perception. But what one might perceive, by the light of faith, and one's free will disposing one to see, is the sublimity of the teaching, or the miraculous character of the liturgy or the life of the Church, or so on. In other words, the signs of credibility themselves are either perceived in a certain way through the light of faith, or obscured by one's pride or other vices.

Thirdly, while it is difficult to apply contemporary classifications to a medieval thinker, still, I doubt that Aquinas can be categorized as neatly as Jenkins does (following Eleanor Stump) as an *externalist* regarding epistemic warrant. I doubt this because Aquinas's notion of propositional knowledge as a knowing that one knows, and thus as essentially reflexive, seems to include in the completed act of knowing an implicit awareness of the essential orientation (or design) of the intellectual act and of the intellect to truth (see, e.g., *On Truth*, Q. 1, article 9, *Summa Theologiae*, Pt I, Q. 16, a. 2). Awareness, on some level, of signs of credibility, while not the sole or even the primary mover (motive) in the act of faith, do seem to play for Aquinas an essential role in helping to assure the believer that his act is not done lightly (*leviter*)—see *Summa Theologiae*, Pt. II-II, q. 2, a. 9, ad 3).

This is a very worthwhile book. It accomplishes many things, among them, setting out an original interpretation of Aquinas's notion of *sacra doctrina*, or theology, and an interesting, provocative interpretation of him on the light of faith. The book also bears witness to the tremendous wealth and depth of Aquinas's work.

Faith and Understanding, by Paul Helm. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. Pp. viii, 212.

SANDRA MENSSEN, University of St. Thomas

This book examines and evaluates the relationship between faith and philosophy as that relationship is expressed in the tradition of "faith seeking understanding." The first three chapters offer a general survey and exposition of the tradition. The last five chapters consider case-studies, particular exemplifications of the tradition: Augustine's account in the *Confessions* of time and creation, Anselm's understanding of faith and reason in the first four chapters of the *Proslogion*, Anselm's understanding of the incarnation, Jonathan Edward's account of original sin, and John Calvin's notion of the *Sensus Divinitatis*.

Helm holds, together with the classical proponents of the faith-seeking-understanding tradition, that philosophy is a help-mate rather than an enemy of faith. I am entirely in agreement with him here. In fact, the point seems to me somewhat more obvious than Helm takes it to be. (Perhaps I

underestimate the lure of fideism.) Still, Helm's emphasis on the comple-
mentary relationship between faith and reason is welcome.

    The book has a number of attractive features. Helm's two-part division
of the text into theory and application seems a good way for a beginner to
approach the tradition of faith seeking understanding. Of course, theory
can be — perhaps must be — extended through particular applications, but
general overviews help us get our bearings before embarking on particular
paths. And the particular paths Helm chooses to explore in the second part
of the book are thoughtfully chosen. Helm usefully emphasizes the diversi-
ty of the instantiations of "faith seeking understanding": he considers how
the tradition plays itself out not only in the examination of specific religious
doctrines, but also in reflection on Scriptural texts, and in metaphysical
reflections, and in reflections on particular thinkers in the Christian tradi-
tion. The book is carefully footnoted. Readers can follow up on a wide vari-
ety of intriguing analyses Helm cites, from texts of classical authors (such as
Augustine and Aquinas) to writings of leading contemporary analysts (e.g.,
Alston, Leftow, Plantinga, Stump, Swinburne, and Wolterstorff). And
while readers can research sources if they choose, there is an explicit and
refreshing insistence on examining not the historical provenance of ideas
and arguments, but the ideas and arguments themselves.

    The general overview of faith and understanding would, I think, be
strengthened by greater attention to definition and clarification. Consider,
for instance, Helm's introductory account of two notions of reason — sub-
stantive reason and procedural reason. The reader is expected gradually to
piece together definitions of the two sorts of reason on the basis of Helm's
comments. It is a lot harder work than it ought to be. This is partly the
consequence of some sloppiness in expression — for instance, substantive
reason is sometimes spoken of as a *set of propositions:*

> As we have just noticed 'reason' can be used as a name for a body of
> propositions, a set of truths which are held to be self-evidently true,
> or obviously true, or highly likely to be true, and on which all other
> truth-claims, including religious truth-claims, must be based. (p. 5)

But Helm also describes substantive reason as a *view about a set of proposi-*
tions:

> Let us call the view that there are such self-evident or highly likely or
> obvious truths the *substantive* sense of reason.... (p. 5)

    The reader must not only mentally correct this sort of sloppiness, but
also disambiguate on occasions when the information necessary for disam-
biguation is not immediately at hand. Helm tells us about the first sort of
reason that

> What makes this use of reason *substantive* is that it is held that by its
> use alone we may gain knowledge about the world.... (p. 6)

Does Helm mean here that though something other than substantive reason

may give us knowledge about the world, we can get at least some knowledge solely through substantive reason? This interpretation does not seem unreasonable. But Helm later rules it out, saying that "Any reasoning about anything requires the acceptance, the use, of procedural reason" (p. 7). Does the sentence at issue mean we cannot get knowledge of the world unless we rely on substantive reason? I think we are supposed to opt for this interpretation. We are supposed to see substantive reason as working in tandem with procedural reason (the rules of deductive and inductive logic): both are necessary for knowledge of the world, and neither is by itself sufficient for complete knowledge of the world. But all this is much less clear than it should be, particularly for an introductory section of the book intended to set up the framework of analysis for the rest of the work.

It seems to me that the best way of developing the concepts that will frame analysis of the faith seeking understanding tradition is to offer definitions that give us a tree of excluded middles. If one is concerned to understand different senses of 'reason' it is extremely helpful to begin by saying something like: "A commitment to reason either involves a commitment to the view that there are self-evident truths, or it does not." That is, either P or ~P. Then one can go on: if P, either Q or ~Q; if Q, either R or ~R; etc. Such a taxonomy facilitates precise definitions of different senses of reason, and helps us grasp logical relationships among the different senses.

Helm's account of three different senses of faith also leaves me wanting a tree of excluded middles. The first view of faith, Helm says, is that faith "is an evidential gap-bridger or make-weight"; on this view faith exhibits a degree of certainty greater than the evidence warrants. The second view (the "evidentialist" or "proportionalist" view) is that the certainty of faith is proportional to the evidence. The third view is that evidence is irrelevant to faith.

In developing his account of the first understanding of faith Helm says that faith (on this account) has a certainty authorized by Christian revelation "in rather the way in which the expertise of a scientist warrants a layman's trust in some theory beyond the degree to which the layman can understand it." But notice that the fact the layman cannot understand the scientific theory does not mean he necessarily has a conviction or certainty about the theory that extends beyond the warrant of the evidence. At least sometimes, when the layman understands the nature of the scientific authority supporting the theory, he may appeal to the weight of that authority as fully warranting his (admittedly inexpert) conviction.

It seems possible for someone to have grounds for accepting Christian revelation as a whole because the person has philosophical or historical grounds for accepting a particular body proclaiming the revelation as authoritative, and in that case the person may obtain warrant for individual propositions that are a part of Christian revelation. *Among* the propositions believed in this manner may be the proposition "One ought to believe Christian revelation whole-heartedly and unreservedly."[1] I would describe such belief as belief in which the certainty of faith is proportional to the evidence *in one sense, but not in another.* The believer has

evidence warranting resolute belief, but not purely philosophical or historical evidence, not evidence that avoids all appeal to religious authority, not evidence that yields *knowledge*. The certainty of such faith is not the certainty one associates with knowledge.

Is it really important to draw this sort of distinction? I think so. By way of illustration I will comment briefly on Helm's discussion of Norman Kretzmann's account of faith seeking understanding,[2] a discussion flawed, I think, by Helm's failure to draw the distinction I have just mentioned. Helm takes Kretzmann to conceive of faith as exhibiting a degree of certainty greater than the evidence warrants (i.e., Helm sees Kretzmann as endorsing the first of the three accounts of faith). But if "the evidence" that is relevant is allowed to include an appeal to authority, where there is philosophical evidence for accepting the authority in question — where there is a case better than .5 that the alleged authority is a *real* authority — then Kretzmann might well say that the certainty of faith is warranted by the evidence. If we are uncomfortable attaching to Kretzmann (and the Augustinian account he explicates) the label "evidentialist" or "proportionalist", then we need to give a more detailed account of varieties of the first, non-evidentialist concept of faith, an account that distinguishes between the view that the sum total of evidence does not warrant resolute belief, and the view that purely philosophical-historical evidence — evidence that at no point draws in an appeal to authority — does not warrant resolute belief.

By noticing that evidence *of a sort* supports the first kind of faith we avoid some of the mistakes Helm seems to make in his commentary on Kretzmann's Augustinian account of faith. After mentioning some of the evidence Augustine and Bonaventure offer for the credibility of the propositions of faith Helm writes that

> There is little suggestion in Augustine and Anselm that the authority of the Church needs rational support to make it credible; rather the reverse. Here, for example, is what Anselm says on the matter: "No Christian ought to debate whether something which the Catholic Church believes with its heart and confesses with its mouth is false. ..." (p. 42)

Whether or not Anselm thought that the authority of the Church should be underwritten by rational support, the quotation from Anselm does not substantiate the view that rational support is unnecessary. The quotation is entirely consistent with thinking that *because* the Church's authority is rationally established one should not debate Church teachings. And whether or not Augustine thought that the authority of the Church needs rational support to make it credible, Kretzmann's lucid and helpful exposition of what he terms an Augustinian understanding of faith seeking understanding clearly recognizes an inescapable need to have *grounds* for accepting the Church's authority.

Attending to the existence of evidence for Church authority helps us see that (contrary to Helm's claim) there is no "tension" between Kretzmann's idea that understanding involves displaying the coherence

of propositions and the rational grounds for them, and Kretzmann's idea that there is a sense in which understanding can supplant faith. Why would anyone think there is tension between these two ideas? Perhaps Helm imagines Kretzmann to hold that philosophical under-standing can completely supplant faith, and that unless understanding supplants faith there is an unacceptable evidential gap for the believer. (If Helm is not imagining this, then I do not know what he has in mind.) But Kretzmann is quite clear that in the Augustinian picture of things understanding will never completely supplant faith. "Propositional understanding" supplants "propositional faith," to use Kretzmann's ter-minology — but propositional faith is not the only kind of faith. A believer will always (at least in this lifetime) believe propositions that are not grounded in purely philosophical arguments; philosophy cannot carry us so far that we completely dissolve all of the mysteries of faith. Nevertheless, there need not be an "evidential gap" that renders the believer's faith irrational; evidence that the Church is the oracle of God underwrites revealed propositions that lack purely philosophical under-pinnings.

Helm's critical discussion of Kretzmann seems to undervalue or even miss the fact that evidence of a sort may warrant resolute belief, whole-hearted faith, and that the evidence may well include warrant for the authority of the Church. Now Kretzmann is just one of many authors Helm considers in the course of his book. And Helm's discussion of Kretzmann is just a single example suggesting Helm's discussion is flawed for want of developing a careful taxonomy (ideally a tree of excluded middles) of accounts of faith. But it is an important example, I think, because throughout Helm's book there seems to be a general undervaluing of the existence and significance of evidence for faith. The tradition of faith seeking understanding is quite compatible with emphasizing evidence for faith (Kretzmann's discussion of Augustine makes this clear). If the role *evidence* for faith plays in the faith-seeking-understanding tradition is highlighted, the tradition becomes an impor-tant resource for non-believers interested in investigating and evaluating the warrants for faith. Both believers *and* inquiring agnostics can learn from the rich tradition Helm introduces in his book.

NOTES

1.   See Thomas D. Sullivan, "Resolute Belief and the Problem of Objectivity," in Linda Zagzebski, ed., *Rational Faith: Catholic Responses to Reformed Epistemology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 110 - 139.

2.   Helm's discussion focuses on Kretzmann's "Faith Seeks, Understanding Finds: Augustine's Charter for Christian Philosophy," in Thomas P. Flint, ed., *Christian Philosophy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).