

Improper, but Not Illegitimate: Mindreading through the Ages

(Introduction)

“Credo ut intelligam or Credo quia absurdum? – Reason and Beyond Reason in Religious Faith”: this title might suggest that the present volume is just another contribution that discusses the relationship between religious faith and knowledge in a traditional manner. This is not precisely the case. In a somewhat unusual way, we have turned our focus to those borderline areas of medieval philosophical and religious thought that are marked by improper, but not illegitimate uses of philosophical language, devised to convey ideas that are impossible to grasp in terms of ordinary, proper language usage. Thus, we are exploring areas of philosophical and theological language which are designed, adopting a metaphor by Descartes he used to characterize our difficulties in talking about God, to (mentally) touch the bark of a huge oak tree that we cannot embrace.

The metaphor of touch, although applied in a different context, plays a central role in György Heidl’s paper. Heidl discusses the Biblical and philosophical concepts of faith that might have influenced early Christian spirituality and draws a strong connection between “faith” and the metaphor of “touch,” which – in turn – leads to fundamental questions about Christian and Platonic mysticism.

Gyula Klima’s paper, “Words and what is beyond words,” directly addresses the extraordinary hermeneutical scenario generated by the improper, but not illegitimate uses of language required to talk about what is beyond the grasp of the ordinary meanings of our ordinary words. To provide a sufficiently general theoretical framework for the discussion of this hermeneutical scenario, he distinguishes three typical interpretational practices, and argues for what he regards as the “the golden mean” between two bad extremes.

Joshua Hochschild describes medieval logic using the metaphor of “game” (with reference to Hermann Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game*) and the traditional metaphor of “tool”. In spite of being a leisurely activity, something done for its own sake, a game can also serve a purpose outside of itself. Similarly, a tool is not merely instrumental, insofar as it can have its own intrinsic goods and can shape and be shaped by that which it serves. After reviewing some distinctive ways in which theology shaped developments of medieval logic, Joshua Hochschild’s

paper summarizes key examples from the work of Thomas Aquinas where medieval logic shaped the articulation and is therefore crucial to a proper understanding of theological claims and arguments.

The purpose of Gábor Borbély's paper is to explore some of the basic assumptions that, he believes, Aquinas's ambitious work, the *Summa contra Gentiles* greatly depends on. These assumptions appear to form the bedrock of Aquinas's deep personal convictions, and as such they may have been the driving force behind his attempt to manifest the truth and eliminate all human error in this work. By casting light upon these assumptions, Borbély aims to clarify some aspects of his „odd project” that has stubbornly resisted attempts at contextualization.

Nicolas Faucher's paper explores the concept of voluntary belief in Peter John Olivi's work. Voluntary belief is being produced to fulfill the individuals' moral duties and to promote common human activities. Its concept, however, seems to be at odds with doxastic normativity that we tend to attribute to our ordinary beliefs. Furthermore, its use seems to lead to an infinite regress. Nicolas Faucher's paper deals with these issues in the context of the Olivian doctrine of faith.

Magali Roques's paper focuses on one class of social realities in William of Ockham's academic writings, the class of “voluntary signs,” which includes not only linguistic signs, but also monetary price, property right, and the sacraments. Roques argues that for Ockham these signs have a social function because a mental act is part of their definition, namely, the decision to endow a material object with a social function for the first time or to follow an established social practice. She further argues that the model of the covenant that grounds social reality (economic and other kinds of social exchanges, including linguistic exchanges) is to be conceived analogously to the model of the covenant between God and human beings (concerning what is required for salvation, and therefore especially the sacraments).

György Geréby delves into a common theme shared by Peter Damian and Hans Jonas, namely, the issue of the changeability of the past. Contrary to the common view, Hans Jonas in the twentieth century and Petrus Damiani in the eleventh, independently from each other, argued for the possibility of a retroactively changeable past. In the case of Jonas, the changeability is implicit, based on two considerations: the first is the result of his analysis of the conditions of truth in historical statements, while the second is the consequence of his reflections on the theological implications of the shoah. In Damiani's case, the changeability is explicit, an original idea against the views of Aristotle, Jerome and Augustine, based on his understanding of divine omnipotence, supported by ingenious logical analysis. While Jonas and Damiani reached their conclusions independently, both were based on theological considerations, albeit on widely different ones.

Dániel Schmal analyses some literary and argumentative techniques employed by late scholastic writers to integrate new elements into traditional wisdom. The authors chosen for this study, Nicolás Martínez and Leonard Lessius, illustrate how late scholastic writers treat the Patristic and medieval heritage when they use authoritative texts for innovative purposes. Although ecclesiastical authority continues to serve as the basis for theological argumentation in their texts, the case studies highlight how making distinctions among meanings allegedly present in the tradition, along with other “techniques of alignment,” are employed to integrate new ideas and fulfil the need for conformity at the same time.

Gábor Borbély – Gyula Klima

