

Review Article

Metaphysics: Its Relevance and Restoration. Prospect for Metaphysics, Essays in Metaphysical Exploration, edited by Prof. Ian T. Ramsey (Allen and Unwin, 240 pp. 25s.).

This volume of essays seeks to probe the ground upon which a satisfactory metaphysics can be built today. Partly because of the unverifiable speculations of Hegelians and chiefly because of the widespread return to a thorough-going empiricism which such speculations prompted, metaphysics has been a virtually forbidden study in this country for the past twenty-five years. The very laudable and typically British desire to stick to facts and common-sense has meant the exclusion of anything which claimed to deal with that which is "beyond" or "other than" or "more than" sense data. Hence metaphysics has been outlawed and, of course, with it most serious philosophy of religion. And if such a metaphysical area of study as the philosophy of religion is declared to have no intelligible meaning because it has no verifiable checks, then all the systems of Christian doctrine are cut loose from any relevance to everyday life.

For some this has been no loss and Christian doctrine has been enjoyed for its own sake as a privileged area guaranteed by divine revelation, a charmed circle within which to work regardless of what unbelieving philosophers are saying. This attitude has much to commend it. It does justice to the radical distinctiveness of Christianity. The importance of Christian doctrine is very great, providing as it does an objective formulation of the Truth as it is in Christ. It preserves Christianity from vagueness and gives it a definite outline. But once doctrine is divorced from firm empirically-rooted facts it ceases to have appeal and relevance and becomes the source for hair-splitting heresy hunts. The great Reformation doctrine of Justification by Faith had the merit of being relevant to the feelings of many in the late medieval church who felt their guilt and unimportance before God. The theology of the Reformers was effective because it gave expression to Christian metaphysics at the point where the metaphysical question impinged upon ordinary people. It is therefore seriously unwise today to ignore the challenge to the very existence of metaphysics as an intellectual discipline and valid area of study.

On the other hand there are those who, having faced the problem of the challenge to metaphysical assertions decided it was

easier to yield up all claim to them. In so doing they have exchanged Christianity for a pale moralism, and now have a religion without God. It is very easy for moral activism to replace a concern for Christian doctrine, and the dividing line between Humanism and Christianity becomes very difficult to define—still more to defend. In fact this response to the contemporary challenge has produced a renewed interest in practical Christian ethics which is in itself a rebuke to the majority of Christians who are complacent about current ethical problems. But such a commendable concern must be buttressed by a clearly Theistic and Christian metaphysical system and not just a Humanistic one, a system which can give full support for a genuinely Christian contribution to moral problems. The current rapprochement between Christians and Humanists needs testing by the adequacy of the metaphysics to which each adhere.

This somewhat lengthy introduction will serve to show that the need to rehabilitate metaphysics is not simply an obscure academic question, but one which is intimately related to Christianity today. The very severe difficulties which are inherent in Christian philosophy have been brought out into the light of searching criticism and discussion during the past two decades. This has helped Christians to see more clearly what it is that they really wish to claim and to say. Any criticism rightly accepted helps to clarify one's mind upon an issue. The threat to remove the metaphysical substructure of Christianity has made Christian philosophers see more clearly just *why* they need one, and also more precisely where such metaphysics must begin. Despite all prohibitions against metaphysics there remains an uncomfortable demand within a Christian thinker to go on asking ultimate questions. The first step then towards a restoration of metaphysics is to locate the whereabouts of this demand in our experience, once this is done we have found the point at which the eternal touches the finite. This is the point at which a religious view of life is most clearly found, and where metaphysics begins. The chief single merit of this volume is that it isolates and defines this point for us in opposition to all empirical attempts to deny its existence.

The essays that form this volume were read at a conference held during Easter Week in 1959 at Downside Abbey. The twelve contributors include Roman Catholics and Protestants, moralists, Thomists, a Platonist, as well as those who derive their inspiration from more recent philosophical thought. The editor is Professor Ramsey, the Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion of Oxford. As well as contributing one of the most interesting essays in the book, Professor Ramsey also writes a most valuable introduction which ought to be read before and after reading the essays. It draws out the salient points in each essay

and serves to link together their common themes. The essays themselves are of varying interest and merit, but on the whole there is a remarkable sense of unity, a positive approach and development throughout from the first essay to the last.

The first two essays are on ethics. This subject has suffered in many ways as theology has done from the prohibition of metaphysical thinking. But at the same time it has proved more adaptable to a through-going empirical interpretation. Dr. Rees writes a specialist paper on the recent history of ethical thought. He shows the complex nature of many standard ethical concepts. His positive point is that certain moral attitudes are only intelligible in the light of certain metaphysical schemes. In other words, a metaphysical system may be presupposed by a morality, and at the same time may suggest a certain morality. In much the same way people's lives often presuppose a natural theology which in turn entails appropriate behaviour. Dr. Rees tends to become rather vague at the crucial points, a tendency to which many are prone when they leave their specific field for its implications in other spheres. Dr. A. C. Ewing writes on the autonomy of ethics, showing that one simply cannot move straight from the ethical "ought" to the Divine imperative. This is a subject for which another contributor, Professor H. D. Lewis, is also noted. Mr. J. S. Dickie makes explicit the assumption, which many of us vaguely have, that the epistemologies of both science and theology are basically the same. His study of both ancient and also modern scientific thought illustrates his point that science preserves one from ontologism, but that it does not necessarily lead to a mechanistic view of the universe.

Mr. Howard Root's essay "Metaphysics and Religious Belief" takes us an important step forward. He examines and criticises the plausible view, put forward by Alasdair MacIntyre in "Metaphysical Beliefs," that "to acquire religious belief is to become 'converted'." In other words, that religious belief is "sui generis," and can neither be proved nor disproved. Nothing can count against it, and no effective apologetic can be made for it. It is his kind of epistemology that lies behind much contemporary continental and American theology. Mr. Root's point is that it is a quite untrue account of how in fact people do come to belief, how people change beliefs, and sometimes give up belief. Reasons play an important part in conversions, and they are not always rationalisations. MacIntyre's central position was "the point in the world at which we worship." He did not develop this, though. The significance of Mr. Root's essay is that he shows how this is *the starting* place for reasoning and metaphysics and not a substitute for it. Any metaphysics that we do try to build, to explain this basic need to worship, must do justice both "to our desire for a

Natural Theology, and also to our religiously inspired distrust of Natural Theology."

Ninian Smart's essay "Revelation, Reason and Religion" develops the metaphysical implications of themes he has written about elsewhere. He examines the various reasons that can be given for adhering to the Christian revelation as opposed to the doctrines of other religions. This follows on well from Mr. Root's essay, for it shows that reasons for certain beliefs spring from a basic apprehension. The new point is that all religions should be brought into the area of investigation to find out the common point at which metaphysics begins amongst all religious people.

Professor Hilary Armstrong's essay on "Platonism" is disappointing, just when we would have expected a vigorous and positive contribution from this much neglected line of thought. He spends too much time on meandering attacks upon modern Thomism and its Aristotelian origins. Another disappointing essay is by Dom Mark Pontifex on "The Question of Evil." It suffers from the disease common to nearly all who try to solve this knotty problem; that is the attempt to justify and explain the ways of God. Dom Mark in effect sets himself up as God's public relations officer, when in fact no one can know why God permits evil. A common conclusion to discussions on this problem is to say that the religious person is best able to face suffering and to bear it. But this is not the answer; it ought rather to be the starting point for the answer to the problem. We cannot start from God's end; the lesson of the empirical challenge is that we must start from our end and begin by analysing the affirmations which the believer makes which enable him to overcome evil by faith. The lesson of other essays in the book is that it is the point at which we worship or have a disclosure or an intuition which is the starting point for metaphysical solutions.

Canon D. J. B. Hawkins asks the question: "Granting that we need to talk of God, what word in our language can we use significantly of Him?" He suggests (as a good Thomist) the notion of "being." "Being" is too often left today in the hands of the logician, says Dr. Hawkins, when in fact the logic of "being" is not at all the same as ontology. The trouble today is that metaphysics is fed into the mill of logic, whereas in the Middle Ages the trouble was that logic went unaltered into the realm of metaphysics. Dr. Hawkins expresses the feeling of many today when he protests against the reduction of the most fundamental experiences to so much logical data. From this point on the essays begin to expose the weakness inherent in the empiricist position and to build upon the ineradicable basis for a true metaphysics.

Dom Illtyd Trethowan makes a very penetrating and seemingly valid criticism of the first two chapters of Professor A. J. Ayer's

"The Problem of Knowledge." Ayer, like Hume in the 18th century, concludes that there is an element of doubt or uncertainty in all knowledge. It is this epistemological scepticism which forms the basis of his rejection of knowledge of the Self as more than sense data. Hence Dom Illtyd's essay is an important piece of basic criticism which needed doing before any hope of restoring metaphysics can be entertained. The chief criticism he makes is to show that Professor Ayer has falsely dissociated "having an experience from knowing that one has it." In fact we recognise that knowledge is experience and is therefore certain. Professor Ayer is to modern philosophers of religion what Hume was to Christians of his day. For this reason it is vital that his assumptions should be tested. Dr. C. B. Daly performs another valuable task in opposition to Professor Ayer by exposing his totally inadequate account of the "Self." As Dr. Daly rightly says, "It would seem that to exclude discussion of the Self from philosophy, is to exclude discussion of God from philosophy too." It was Hume's inability, and one which he admitted, to deal with the fact of the Self that permits penetrating criticisms of some of his views now. The same is true of Professor Ayer. Professor Ramsey draws attention as he did in his book *Religious Language* to the logical relatedness of "I" and "God." He says that an adequate metaphysics must build upon the one certain metaphysical fact, that of the Self. These points are the subject of the last three essays in the book.

In his essay "Metaphysics and the Limits of Language," Dr. Daly gives a valuable and brief survey of metaphysics in recent British philosophy. He then goes on to uncover the fact that the reduction of "I exist" by logicians to a merely indicative statement which gives no knowledge about oneself, is the cause of the contemporary ban on metaphysics. The "Self" is made into a mere logical construction out of objective sense data. Dr. Daly exposes Professor Ayer's inadequate misinterpretation of Descartes' "cogito," which is not a logical but an existential starting point. This short section of the book, pages 178-193, is invaluable and ought to be read by anyone who wishes to be an informed modern apologist. Dr. Daly fully acknowledges the importance of the theistic existentialism of Gabriel Marcel as a protest against the modern depersonalising tendencies of society, and the whole task of metaphysics is seen in this light.

The last essay is by Professor H. D. Lewis on the subject "God and Mystery." It is longer than the other chapters, and perhaps unnecessarily so. The concept of mystery as something inexplicable in all our experiences is an important one to which several recent Christian philosophers have drawn attention, notably Marcel and M. B. Foster. The chief point that Professor Lewis makes is

that this mystery is like, though not altogether the same as, the mystery involved in our knowledge of other persons. They are "other," and we have to model our understanding of them and their intentions upon our own understanding of ourselves. Similarly, the mystery which is God is one which we intuit and there is not nor can be a direct knowledge of Him. The mystery in God's case is a total one, but a total mystery offers no hold to the mind. This mystery "presents itself to us in certain circumstances and associates itself with certain other insights and experiences and makes them its own. Out of these come the content of specific beliefs, sometimes confused and distorted, and sometimes more plainly discerned."

We turn to Professor Ramsey's own essay last because it is in many ways the most interesting, comprehensive and constructive one in the volume. It is entitled "On the Possibility and Purpose of a Metaphysical Theology." Professor Ramsey knows fully what the contemporary challenge is, and what its implications are; moreover, he has an answer to it which is the product of very considerable study and reflection. His two books *Religious Language* and *Freedom and Immortality* are the application of his understanding of metaphysical theology to common problems of the philosophy of religion and Christian doctrine. It is good, therefore, to have here in a brief space his view of metaphysics and his programme for metaphysical thinking. Professor Ramsey has been subjected to criticism for his supposed over-simplification of long-standing and knotty problems. But in fact it is the clarity of view of one who has gone back to the source of the problems and solved that, only to return with a solution for problems whose insolubility has almost become an article of faith. He fully accepts the need to start with and stay with the evidence of experience; in this sense he is a true empiricist. He has made the great 18th century empiricists a source for penetrating study and found in them many insights relevant for today, notably in Bp. Berkeley.

Professor Ramsey sees metaphysics as the attempt to draw a rough but illuminating map which will unify the diversities of human experience. For example, when we see a stick in the water we see it bent, but the evidence of touching it says it is straight. A physicist unifies these contradictory or diverse experiences by theories of light rays and refraction. This theorising makes it possible to speak of the stick as "bent" and "straight" at the same time. The theory is a map which explains and illuminates a problem. Metaphysics seeks "integrator words" which, like a map, will give our bearings amidst the confusion of multiple experiences. Science has gone a long way towards this amongst physical things. "Such logically diverse areas as light, heat and magnetism and electricity, for example, have been integrated by concepts such as

mass, velocity, energy." Beyond this such integrator concepts as Matter or Evolution have been used to unify everything, and these words have in turn been used in the past to sponsor ethical and theological theories. But science cannot really supply satisfactory metaphysical integrators for that which comes from within the physical cannot be expected to unite the physical; hence the need for meta-physics. A concept is needed which is more than spatio-temporal. It is our use of "I" which justifies the recourse to that which is more than sense-data. Such integrators as "Being" and "Absolute" are sometimes suggested, but they are impersonal and are known only mediately. Hence the importance of the "Self" in modern Christian philosophy. Professor Ramsey holds that "God" is the word which is the integrator *par excellence*, "which provides the most simple, far-reaching and coherent metaphysical map." The word "I" unites for me all scientific and other descriptive assertions about myself, and it is more than all such descriptions. It is firmly rooted to facts about me, yet it goes beyond and eludes all reduction to mere description, while at the same time it is intelligible to me. Certain experiences of moral challenge may suggest "Duty" as an integrator on a larger scale which holds together general experiences. But "Absolute values" only cover ethical experiences, whereas disclosures of some "other" occur in Nature and so the word "God" is necessary and suitable to integrate "all those features of the world that a metaphysics confined to persons or values would have to ignore." Thus, "God" can integrate talk about persons, values, science and perception; it is limited to none and covers all; it is, therefore, a truly metaphysical concept. We can start to talk about "God" in rather the same way as we use "I." But "God" is different from "I" just in those observable differences between the disclosures in the natural realm and those which lead to the intuition of ourselves or other people.

This is an essay which ought to be read, studied and mastered, especially by theological students puzzled by the purpose and achievement of the philosophy of religion. It will help to clarify the intention which lies behind Professor Ramsey's two books referred to above; books which are deceptively lucid. It is not too much to claim that this is the revolutionary thinking which is so necessary in the 20th century to give new drive and a fresh direction to the main stream of Christian thought. It is not just the patching up of old worn arguments; it is radically different insofirmly in empirically verifiable facts, and also using to the full the far as it fully accepts the challenge to keep one's language rooted concept of the "Self" or "I" which is characteristic of theism as we have seen. It is to be hoped that the book *Fact, Metaphysics and God* which Professor Ramsey promised in the preface to

Religious Language will soon be published. The volume here reviewed is important and valuable, but it needs to be followed by such an extended treatment of metaphysics as Professor Ramsey could give us. Such a work would demand wider and more considered respect from sceptical philosophers. Altogether it may be said that this is a timely and necessary book. It has many good critical sections, as well as constructive suggestions. Certainly we may say we are taking a sure and steady step forward on a path-way which has for too long been marked "Out of Bounds."

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