Book Review: Rationality In The Calvinian Tradition

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BOOK REVIEWS


The essays comprising this volume were originally given at a conference in Toronto where members of different branches of Calvinism (and some interested onlookers) engaged in dialogue. The volume is divided into two parts, the first focusing on the historical setting and the second on some key problems.

In the first of two essays on Calvin, Charles Partee examines the concept of rationality in Calvin’s *INSTITUTES*, placing it in the context of his anthropology and the theological themes of creation, fall and redemption. After a broad but cursory survey, he concludes that Calvin’s conception of rationality is unsystematic, and so different views of rationality may be Calvinist so long as they are not distortions of Calvin’s theology.

Dewey Hoitenga agrees that Calvin has no well-defined concept of reason, since he does not analyze various noetic states such as knowledge, belief, certainty, and the like. Still he has a theory of religious knowledge which Hoitenga characterizes as being “Christian and Biblical but also broadly Platonic and Augustinian.” Hoitenga shows that Calvin argued for a natural knowledge of God which is rooted in creation, but which after the fall is powerless to lead to salvation. True knowledge of God is possible, therefore, only through faith, which occurs through the Spirit and not through human ability. Hoitenga expounds Calvin’s position well, and also critiques some contemporary misconceptions. Neither Hoitenga nor Partee show familiarity with the historical context of Calvin’s theology.

The second historical setting examined is the Scottish Common-sense tradition. Paul Helm presents Thomas Reid’s view of rationality, noting some of the ambiguities in Reid’s use of the term and the opposition set up between common sense and philosophy. Helm also explains why Reid’s common-sense foundationalism was attractive to several generations of Calvinist theologians and apologists. Reid’s thought replied to skepticism, affirmed the common-sense world, and was compatible with the inductivist approach to knowing prominent in that day and the *a posteriori* apologetic stance typical of English theology. Although numerous Calvinists adopted Scottish common-sense realism as their philosophy, Helm shows that the link between the two is tenuous at best. Nothing
in Calvinism makes it require common-sense foundationalism.

Although nothing in Calvinism may require common-sense foundationalism, some Calvinists remain fascinated by it. Nicholas Wolterstorff, while acknowleding that Reid's focus and emphases are radically different from Calvin's, believes that Reid has some important insights for current epistemological discussions. He argues that Reid is concerned with "skepticism concerning justified belief" and examines Reid's analysis of dispositions, inclinations and propensities and the principles of common sense which arise from them. Wolterstorff finds Reid opposing classical foundationalism in three ways: he recognizes that rationality is always situational, his theory of rationality is set in the context of psychology, and his foundationalism is not sceptical. Wolterstorff criticizes Reid for failing to recognize how reason is biased by a person's circumstances and affected by sin. Although he is critical of Reid in some respects, Wolterstorff finds much in him that is worthwhile. The romance between Calvinism and the Scottish common-sense philosophy is still not over.

A third strand of Calvinism has been the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition. Jacob Klapwijk and Albert Wolters give informative surveys of this movement. Klapwijk focusses primarily on interpretations of the "religious antithesis." Among Calvinists there were disagreements about how the religious opposition between Christian and non-Christian would be manifested in other areas of life. The views of Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, Van Peursen and others are outlined. Klapwijk himself takes the position that opposition is on the level of principles and not of organizations. Also, he holds that the non-Christian is in a struggle with the truth, even if this is denied. Hence, there is the working of God's spirit even in heathenism, secularism, and modern ideologies, and Christian scholars must be open-minded to this wisdom of the world but not adjust to it.

Wolters distinguishes "world-view," a pre-scientific understanding of reality shared by all, from the theoretical account of the totality of things characteristic of philosophy. He holds that many supposedly philosophical conflicts actually stem from differing pre-theoretical commitments. He argues that the philosophers in the Dutch Calvinist tradition agree in their world-view, but differ significantly philosophically.

The first of five key problems treated in the second part of this volume is the nature and limits of rationality. In a carefully worked essay entitled "The Role of Reason in the Regulation of Belief," William Alston examines the belief monitoring function of reason. He believes that this function presents special problems for religious belief. Specifically, he criticizes the claim that a belief can be rational only if it is held for adequate reasons. Belief rests on immediate as well as mediate justification, for mediate justification alone is not sufficient. Justification of any belief is dependent on mediate justification of epistemic principles and this latter requires the unreflective acceptance of some epistemic
principle. Having shown the limits of reason, Alston suggests that reason should not be permitted—contrary to Descartes’ program—to bring the senses and other more basic cognitive faculties before its tribunal; like Reid he holds that we must “humbly accept the epistemic promptings of nature and build on that.” Alston sees in reason’s pretension to judge all an analogue of man’s basic sin, trying to take the place of God. Having rehabilitated perceptual practice in other areas, Alston asserts that the same possibility needs to be explored with regard to religious experience.

Focussing on the same problem, Peter Schouls argues that the limits of rationality are not determined simply by reason but rather by what is ascribed to reason based on human aspirations and decisions. This is aptly illustrated from the thought of Descartes, who insisted on individual freedom or autonomy and rejected any certainty which originates beyond oneself.

Arthur F. Holmes and Hendrik Hart discuss the issue of commitment and rationality. According to Holmes “Christian commitment” includes specific beliefs, other rational activities and states, and non-cognitive states; it constitutes a perspective, a holistic life-world standpoint centered on some religious commitment. “Rationality” is defined broadly as any type of cognitive awareness and more narrowly as the realm of logical arguments and proofs. Christian commitment rouses and grounds reason and reason apprehends and expounds commitment. Commitment manifests itself in belief, a wholistic commitment that generates cognitive confidence, finding grounds where argument falters; likewise theory is a function that arises in the larger practical context of life; subjectivity, involvement, and personal concern are part of objectivity. In each case rationality is part of a larger whole. There is a similar relationship between rationality and Christian commitment. Some specific beliefs are essential to Christian commitment, among them the existence of an external world, the law of non-contradiction, etc. Such universal basic beliefs provide the context for particular beliefs, such as Christian beliefs. Christian commitment is articulated according to the particular historical form of the universal basic beliefs available to a person. Holmes finds that by themselves the universal basic beliefs do not give enough guidance to live and think effectively, and so Christian beliefs, rooted in God’s Word, are necessary to flesh them out. This essay provides a suggestive overview of the topic.

Like Holmes, Hendrik Hart grounds rationality in commitment, but he defines knowledge as “the totality of the known in its coherence.” Rational knowing, the understanding of patterns in the whole of knowledge, is one dimension of knowing; faith, commitment-dominated knowing, another. For Hart there is “a grasping in faith, not in concept, of something that provides us with an ultimate foundation, outside of reason and propositions” and this is the only possible ground for rationality. Creedal statements are not genuine propositions but still
are true statements, for they are tested not by their rationality but by their authenticity in relation to the commitment from which they arise. Hart correctly emphasizes the role of commitment, but a lack of clarity in his understanding of rational knowing keeps him from describing clearly the nature of faith.

In an essay on the nature of philosophy, Henry Pietersma discusses "the scope and limits of transcendental philosophy." Since such philosophy views everything in relation to a subject experiencing it, the question arises, does such an approach allow the philosopher to confront reality or does reality always transcend our reach? Pietersma suggests that the Christian philosopher is in a unique position to answer this question. He recognizes that the answer to this question cannot be found through philosophical inquiry, but his religious-confessional stance gives the Christian philosopher both a confidence in rational inquiry and an awareness that agreement with other philosophers will often be difficult to attain because of their different commitments.

In the second essay discussing the nature of philosophy, D.F.M. Strauss argues that analyzing the coherence among a number of irreducible aspects of reality constitutes the core of philosophy. Basically Strauss explains the idea of modalities as developed by Dooyeweerd, but he also argues that there is an "idea-knowledge" of things which, unlike concept formation, has a knowledge of the individual side of things. This idea-knowledge is said to be the kind of knowledge we have of God. This position is superior to traditional views, e.g. analogy, because it does not require "a rational order encompassing both God and man in order to be able to speak rationally about God." But the exact nature of this idea-knowledge is not explained sufficiently to evaluate the claim made for it.

The fourth problem area investigated is rationality and Scripture. The title of this section leads one to expect an analysis from a Calvinistic perspective of some of the theories of interpretation being proffered today. What is given is much less interesting. In the first essay John Frame reaffirms the importance and distinctive role of Scripture, emphasizing that it must be believed even when other sources contradict it. Unfortunately, the issue about how the meaning of Scripture is determined is never broached; the essay offers only general, programmatic suggestions and fails to take into account current hermeneutical discussions. Likewise N.T. van der Merwe offers a lengthy survey of the topic of rationality, but he also fails to take up relevant hermeneutical issues.

The volume concludes with two essays devoted to "Thinking about God." In the first entitled "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," Alvin Plantinga presents material which many will have seen in other contexts. Plantinga's central contention is that Calvin and Reformed theologians have thought that belief in God is properly basic and that this belief need not be defended on the basis of arguments from natural theology or elsewhere. Plantinga construes this objection to natural theology to be an "unformed and inchoate" rejection of classical
foundationalism. While Reformed theologians have rejected natural theology, Calvin would, I think, be rather surprised by Plantinga's analysis. Calvin does not reject natural theology as such, for he does not discuss proofs for God's existence; rather, he rejects the whole theological method of the Schoolmen. He rejects their employment of philosophical reasoning in theology and he focusses instead on commenting on Scripture, using the tools developed by the Humanists. Also, Calvin expresses admiration for the sciences of the day, and makes no criticisms about how they are ordered. His point is that they are valuable only in relation to earthly things and not for learning about God or salvation. That must come from Scripture. The latter part of Plantinga's essay is devoted to explaining why the fact that belief in God can be basic does not mean that anything goes—such as a belief in the great pumpkin. Belief in God is not groundless and Plantinga indicates in a preliminary way some of its justifying circumstances. Finally, he argues that holding belief in God to be basic does not mean that argument is irrelevant to this belief.

In the final essay, Roy Clouser offers an alternative view of religious language. Language about God is, he says, "ordinary language" rather than analogical language. Against analogy he argues that it requires some likeness between the two realities compared and there is nothing univocally true of God and creatures. Instead Clouser proposes that all properties and relations which Biblical writers attribute to God are created properties, properties which he has taken on in relation to the universe. In this framework the trinity, for example, becomes a created property which God assumes to himself. Clouser's proposal is inventive, but it raises at least as many questions as it answers.

Although the authors of these essays write from diverse philosophical perspectives, they express a unifying theme: reason must be subordinated to the claims of faith. Throughout the authors indicate the limits of reason and the role of commitment. This volume manifests the continuing vitality of the Calvinist tradition and the contribution it is making on the contemporary philosophical scene.


Reviewed by THOMAS V. MORRIS, University of Notre Dame.

This is a clearly written introduction to rational reflection on the credibility of theism. It is well organized, relatively free of technical philosophical jargon, and devoid of the sort of overly complex arguments beginners to philosophy