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Book Review: Grace And Law: St. Paul, Kant, And The Hebrew Prophets

Philip Blosser

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Eternal God is clearly written and discusses a wide range of relevant literature. But though interesting and provocative, the book is not always convincing; while it makes a cogent case that one can maintain DTE, it is less successful in arguing that one should.

Grace and Law: St. Paul, Kant, and the Hebrew Prophets, by **Heinz W. Cassirer**. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, and Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1988. Pp. xvi and 176, \$12.95.

PHILIP BLOSSER, Lenoir-Rhyne College

Most philosophers are acquainted with name of Ernst Cassirer, the world-renowned Jewish Neo-Kantian scholar. But few have ever heard of Heinz Cassirer, his oldest son, or are aware that he was a philosopher in his own right, a biblical scholar, and a convert to the Christian faith. This amazing little book tells the story of the younger Cassirer's intellectual pilgrimage from his secular Jewish and rigorous Kantian upbringing through his growing disenchantment with the Kantian account of moral experience to his confrontation with the account offered by St. Paul and the Hebrew Prophets. It culminates in his statement of his personal reasons for embracing the Christian faith.

In 1933 when the Nazis came to power, Heinz Cassirer left Germany for Switzerland. He was then 30 years old and already the author of an acclaimed study of Aristotle's *De Anima*, about which W. D. Ross wrote that it would be "hard to name a better account of Aristotle's psychology." When Cassirer took up residence in Britain the following year he could speak no English, but within six months he was teaching at Glasgow University and then at Corpus Christi, Oxford, and had begun writing a commentary on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in English.

Like his father, Heinz considered Kant the most profound philosopher that ever lived and devoted much of his career to the mastery of Kant's work. But he also came to regard Kant's philosophy, and especially Kant's view of the role of reason in moral matters, as inadequate. In fact, it was in the course of writing a second commentary, this time on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, that Cassirer became troubled by what increasingly seemed to be the extravagant claims being made by (and for) the intellect in moral matters, and turned for possible answers to something altogether new: a study of the epistles of St. Paul in the original Greek.

There Cassirer discovered a view of human moral experience diametrically opposed to Kant's, but somehow closer to his own understanding of the

human condition. For Kant, “ought” implies “can”; it would be wholly unreasonable to suppose that we could be absolutely certain of being subject to the moral law while remaining devoid of the power of obeying it. For St. Paul, by contrast, the opposite seems to be true: “When the commandment came, sin sprang into life, and I died”; consciousness of being subject to law arouses within us a moral struggle that we seem to have no hope of winning, awakens us to the futility of all our efforts to obey it, and reveals our utter enslavement to natural inclinations.

This paradox posed for Cassirer a challenge of supreme importance. It led him from the Pauline epistles to an extensive study of the Old Testament Prophets and Mosaic Law. Eventually, he withdrew from academic life and received Christian baptism. In 1959 he wrote the manuscript for the present book. In 1973, after two decades of biblical study, he produced his own translation of the entire New Testament (currently being marketed under the title of *God's New Covenant*, by Eerdmans).

Grace and Law is divided into four chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1 is devoted to an extensive examination of the moral implications of St. Paul's conversion, focusing on the change in moral character and perspective undergone by St. Paul. Cassirer investigates the Pauline texts describing the process of spiritual disintegration leading up to his conversion. He insists that the transformation in St. Paul is something that cannot be readily fathomed on the level of rational reflection—that it involved something like a transubstantiation of personality and perspective. He argues that the exacting, internal, and spiritually radical nature of the law in St. Paul's view can be seen from his penetrating account of “covetousness,” the Tenth Commandment. The law reveals the moral impotence of the natural man and the paradoxical character of unmerited, empowering grace. Cassirer emphasizes that St. Paul upholds the integrity of the Mosaic law and insists that the New Testament texts allow no room for an antinomian reading of Pauline theology. Hence, we remain subject to the standards of holiness demanded by the law, but our only hope of conforming our lives to those standards lies in looking beyond our own unaided natural efforts.

In Chapter 2 Cassirer presents a clear and concise summary of Kant's moral philosophy understandable to the general reader. He undertakes a fairly extensive analysis of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, examining key references from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* and *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, and quoting passages from his father's biography of Kant, *Kant's Life and Thought*. One quickly acquires a keen sense in this chapter of Cassirer's deep respect and love for Kant. The Kantian reverence for moral law is, somehow, something eminently noble. In one regard, in fact, Cassirer points out, Kant and St. Paul are curiously alike: in their estimate of *natural* human capacities they seem to be equally pessimis-

tic. Duty, for Kant, is most clearly apparent where it stands in contrast to natural inclinations, which, rooted in the natural desire for personal happiness, can make no significant contribution to morality; but since we never have complete insight into our own true motives, it is perfectly conceivable for Kant that we may never have performed a truly moral action, but only apparent ones whose moral worth was cancelled by their having been mixed with ulterior motives of natural self-interest. Kant differs from St. Paul in his certainty that we have within ourselves (as *rational* beings) the ability to obey the moral law by our own unaided efforts; but he is no less pessimistic than St. Paul about the *natural* man's prospect of keeping the law.

In Chapter 3 Cassirer turns to the Hebrew Prophets and their teaching on the nature of sin and release from sin. He probes the personal, covenantal relationship of God to his chosen people, and the nature of divine wrath as an integral complement to divine love. It is in this chapter, which he counsels his reader to avoid reading out of context, that Cassirer states how his studies led him to embrace the God of his forefathers. He became convinced, he says, that nowhere except in the Old Testament, and predominantly in the prophets, was there to be found an account of moral experience which he could accept as essentially true. Moreover, as in others of his chapters, Cassirer invites those of his readers whose outlook is non-religious or anti-religious to consider, not the particularities of his own religious conversion, but the authenticity of the biblical diagnosis of the human moral malady in their own experience.

In Chapter 4 Cassirer returns to St. Paul and the issues raised in Chapter 1 to offer a thoroughgoing reexamination of St. Paul's doctrine and personality in light of the discussions of the intervening chapters. He offers sustained investigations, notably, of key passages from his Epistle to the Philippians and his Second Epistle to the Corinthians. He argues that the authenticity of St. Paul's moral conversion is supported by a number of facets of his personal character and temperament. He was the sort of person one would least expect to renounce self-will and relinquish control of his life to another; yet his conversion to Christ does really appear to have had the effect of setting him free, since it is evident that he acquired a genuine capacity for loving others, a disarmingly penetrating insight into his own nature as well as into that of others, and a combination of personality traits not normally found reconciled within the same person. Cassirer concludes the chapter by stating his personal reasons for embracing the Christian faith. He has no doubt about the authenticity of St. Paul's conversion or teaching, he says, because St. Paul is the last sort of person in the world who would fall victim to self-deception. "What St. Paul wishes to signify," he writes, "is that whoever commits his life to Christ, far from having his personality destroyed, is, on the contrary, having it restored to him and can now, for the first time, act in a manner which is in conformity with his real nature."

The book contains also a brief appendix in which Cassirer offers some further reflections on St. Paul's relationship to his fellow Jews, an index of biblical references, and a sonnet by Grace Luckin composed at the time of Cassirer's death on February 20, 1979, which appears as the book's frontispiece. Thomas F. Torrance, according to editor Ronald Weitzman, was instrumental in helping to bring the manuscript of this book to final publication, as well as the late Rev. Dr. Eric Abbott, the former Dean of Westminster, who described Heinz Cassirer as "*sui generis*" and persisted in urging that his later writings and translations must be published.

Grace and Law offers an altogether fascinating and instructive study. For anyone the least bit interested in the problems of ethics or moral theology, or in the practical philosophy of Kant, or in Pauline theology of grace and law and its Old Testament background, this book would make profitable reading.

God, Suffering, and Solipsism, by Clement Dore. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989. Pp. x and 120, \$35.00 cloth.

JAMES A. KELLER, Wofford College

This slim volume provides an argument against the skeptical thesis that no one is justified in believing that there exists an external world beyond the present states of that individual's consciousness. Its strategy is similar to Descartes' way of resolving a similar doubt in his *Meditations*: first, establish that God (a being than which no greater being is logically possible) exists; and second, show that this truth, along with certain others that do not depend on the assumption that an external world exists, entail that such a world exists. But though this overall strategy is reminiscent of Descartes, the arguments are much more fully developed than Descartes' and differ from his in several important ways.

As one would suspect from the purpose of the book as well as from the characterization of God given above, the one argument for the existence of God which Dore discusses is the ontological argument. The first four chapters are devoted to articulating and defending certain versions of it. Chapter 1 presents a modal version. But it leaves undefended the claim that God as defined in the argument is a logically possible being. Dore employs two strategies to defend this claim: in Chapter 2 he provides a non-modal ontological argument, which does not depend on the assumption that God is a logically possible being; and in Chapter 4 he explicitly defends the claim that God is a logically possible being. Chapter 3 is devoted to a critique of what