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RESPONSE TO CROSS AND HASKER

David Burrell, C.S.C.

It is not often that one is graced with a mini-symposium upon reception of an article for publication, and for this I am grateful to Bill Hasker, who had to wait until after his editorship to respond to my provocative piece, and equally grateful to Richard Cross, whom Bill solicited for an assist. Since my piece called for a "radical transformation of standard philosophical strategies," and Bill addressed that perspectival issue from the outset, while Richard focused on some axial semantic and epistemological contentions, I shall begin with Bill Hasker's overall puzzlements, proceed to address some issues on which Richard Cross and I seem fated to disagree, and close by addressing the neuralgic point of created freedom, which both Hasker and I find axial to attempting to articulate the creator/creature relation. What gratifies me is the opportunity to interact with such sterling critics, and to try to ascertain whether we can advance a discussion (as Bill Hasker suggests) of issues which no sane human inquirer can ever pretend to "get right."

Let me first articulate my sense of a common lacuna in the work of those whom Bill Hasker identifies, for convenience, as "analytical theists." (I am also "for convenience" labeled a "Thomist," even though many who call themselves "Thomists" would foreswear my reading of Thomas Aquinas.) I usually try to avoid doing philosophy by "isms," perhaps because I find the "convenience" often creates stereotypes. As we shall see, the "Thomist" label is too restrictive, for I shall argue (with my mentor, Bernard Lonergan) that the Christian intellectual tradition was compelled to incorporate metaphysical strategies from the outset, strategies to which Aquinas often succeeded in giving succinct formulation, but which are hardly to be identified parochially with him or with a school that adopted his name. Moreover, a recent commentator on Aquinas, Rudi teVelde, culminates his lucid study with the provocative contention: "Aquinas is not a theist," meaning to distinguish his approach to divinity from those whom Hasker labels "analytical theists."¹ So there is, or can be, a sharp conflict here which "convenience" labels may dull or obscure.

So let me try to sharpen it by articulating the lacuna I find common in the work of those whom Bill Hasker identifies, for convenience, as "analytical theists." To make my original provocative remarks even sharper, let me identify that lacuna as a virtual innocence of the history of Christian thought, or at least an insouciance regarding the role which traditional formulations have played in clarifying those strategies found to be necessary to articulate a revelation so challenging as that of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, rather than making the effort to incorporate those clarifications which the tradition found to be essential, they prefer to



adopt categories designed to make the work “analytic,” when it may turn out that these very categories have been introduced to avoid any reference to a creator, as was the wont of modernity. It is precisely here that I am indebted to Bernard Lonergan’s insistence on Nicaea as axial to Christian life and thought, a theme which Robert Sokolowski codifies with literary conceit: “the distinction.” For the overriding concern of Nicaea (intensified in Chalcedon) is the *shema*: “Hear, O Israel, God our God is One!” The fact that Jesus could not be “associated with God” led to incorporating the extra-biblical formulation *homoousion* in the creed. (This explains why I deliberately made reference to “the Islamic notion of *shirk*, the heresy of ‘associating the creature with God,’” as a way of showing how Christianity had to confront the very difficulty to which Islam takes offence, in order to avoid introducing *rida* [“innovation”] into the original revelation, as some early [as well as recent] Christian thinkers in effect perpetrated in attempting to formulate how Christians could worship Jesus.) This means attending to the inherent dependence of Christian thought on strategies formulated to secure its development, an approach which directly counters the easy bifurcation between “philosophical” and “historical” which Richard Cross employs in deflecting John O’Callaghan’s trenchant critique of his (rather standard) formulation of Aquinas’s semantical epistemology (as we shall see in part two).

Sokolowski proceeds in the opposite way with his “Christian distinction,” designed to summarize ways in which liturgical practice melded with conciliar formulations to insist that the creator-God could not be one of the things in the world. Yet as we shall see, there will be intrinsic limits to our capacity to articulate the relation of creator to creatures, precisely because the creator is not another thing in the world! And, *pace* Bill Hasker’s summary of Sokolowski’s argument for the centrality of “the distinction,” he does go on to recommend Aquinas’s identification of *essence* and *esse* (“act of existing”) as the best way to secure the original and originating “ontological difference” of creator from creatures, much as Robert Adams endorses the same ontological identification as the most succinct way of characterizing God as “necessary being.”² This is a prime example of the way in which Aquinas culminates the tradition before him, to secure it by transforming the metaphysical categories he had to work with. It is this witness of Aquinas which makes me (and Sokolowski) recommend his strategies, as a way of suggesting what we too must do with categories offered to us. But one will utterly miss that signal witness if one is not attuned to axial developments in the history of Christian thought, an insouciance which a bifurcation between “philosophy” and “history” can easily license. As we shall see in the following two parts of this response, certain ways of posing the issues will depend radically on grasping “the distinction,” which cannot be clarified—as Bill wishes—without attending to the complex genealogy of conciliar and theological formulations intended to secure the identity of Christian thought—over against a generic “theism.” Another way of putting this is that *sola scriptura* has never worked, from the earliest centuries on.

Now to Richard Cross’s more semantic discussion, much of which I have to ponder to better grasp Scotus’s strategies. Let me begin simply, by acknowledging that Aquinas has left us with a conundrum, clearly exhibited in his treatment of “divine names,” in which his agreement with Maimonides

is greater than a surface reading of his criticism might suggest (*ST* 1.13).³ He culminates that discussion by insisting that we can indeed affirm something of God by asserting the *res significata* ("thing signified"), even though we must clearly distinguish it from the *modus significandi* ("manner of signifying") (*ST* 1.13.12). Now what is this *res significata*? For Cross's "representationalist Aquinas," it is the concept, for on a "representational" view, we must know the concept in order to know the thing. Whereas if we are to follow Aquinas's development in *ST* 1.13, letting ourselves be guided by John O'Callaghan's treatment of these issues, the *modus significandi* is a far better candidate for the *concept*.⁴ My clue here is his clear statement in *ST* 1.13.2 that "words like 'good' and 'wise' when used of God do signify something that God really is, but they signify it imperfectly, because creatures represent God imperfectly" (McCabe translation). Yet this is the conundrum, of course, for if we must use an "imperfect concept" to state a perfection which outreaches any concept we can have of it, how can we be said to assert something truly of God? Or of anything, of course, so we have broached the \$64 epistemological question raised by Plato in the *Meno*. So let us back up and try to find a way around the conundrum.

The first step will jettison a "representational" approach, and let Aquinas and O'Callaghan remind us that concepts are not objects *per se*, but *that by which* something is known to be what it is. Some fit better than others, which is what discussion is all about, and others will never quite fit, as Socrates kept showing us. I like to distinguish between questions which have an answer ("how far is it from South Bend to O'Hare?") from those which require discussion, first to clarify and then to attempt an illuminating initial response, like "should the US get out of Iraq?" And I would put all ethical questions in the second group, as signaled by "should." Aquinas identifies a privileged subset of terms alone able to be used of God, which he calls "perfection terms," which I would extend to all evaluative terms. They are all susceptible of that inner differentiation which Socrates finds in "wise," where the proper grammar for "wise" is that "wise persons know they are not wise." Without this inner "play," ethics becomes conventional morality, which of course is not morality at all! This is how "analogous terms" operate: without any theory we develop ways of negotiating their proper use. It's like learning how to take corners on a bicycle; there are formulae, but even if we knew them we would not have time to calculate the answer before taking the corner! (Polanyi). Indeed, this is "commonsensical," for "ordinary people" can be very good at such things; "wise," we might say, yet we can readily distinguish between someone adept and someone "wooden." Aristotle (and the GRE's) remind us that intelligence is displayed in an adept use of metaphor, which might suggest why I find *univocity* procrustean in domains other than the divine as well.

How do we gain such adeptness? There is only one answer: through practice; but it must also be acknowledged that some never do! That suggests that we are in the realm of *judgment* here, for judgment gives some the ability to direct an inadequate concept to its target, whereas others will simply allow it to mislead them. Yet with such practices we are entering that way of doing philosophy which Pierre Hadot identifies with "ancient philosophy"; something which modernity, preoccupied with finding adequate concepts, has simply overlooked.⁵ Yet if we ask ourselves why we

find some writing on tangled, ethical issues better than others, it will indeed have to do with clarity but with much more as well: like nuance, a feeling for context, judicious weighing of alternatives. Has philosophy no room for this, when human considerations demand it? In short, Richard, I agree that one can construct highly abstract concepts that could pass muster as “univocal”; I just don’t think you can do much, if anything, with them. For example, Scotus’s assertions that “every philosopher was certain that that which he posited to be the first principle was a being,” supplemented by “there are some concepts—here, *being*—under whose extension both God and creatures fall,” both fail the test question: “how many things are there in the room?” We cannot obtain a generic “animal” at the shelter for animals nor can we pick out things as things: “being” cannot function as a sortal term. (Astute readers will hear echoes of Aristotle and of Wittgenstein throughout: here it is the need for “grit”; earlier, the need sometimes for “agreement in judgments.”) And again, what happens when we find ourselves agreeing in judgments with an interlocutor? I suspect that we have negotiated a sinuous path together, made adjustments for the disparity of contexts from which we individually came, and found some illumination together; in short, we are “able to go on” (Wittgenstein). And if arguments touching on real situations will inevitably require adjustment for context, then the working notions cannot be *univocal*. But could “adjustment” here mean finding a univocal intersection between the disparate senses of the original notions? Sometimes it might; at other times it might mean that both interlocutors must step into a richer context.

The latter is Aquinas’s strategy when he asks whether there can be any “likeness” between creatures and the creator. The answer, predictably, is YES and NO: precisely as sharing in *existence* creatures can resemble their creator (*ST* 1.4.3). But since *existing* is not a feature of things, and we normally trace resemblance to features held in common, then whatever links them cannot be identified. This is perfectly in character with Aquinas’s metaphysics, since what makes discourse about divinity possible at all is the act of creation, itself a gift, which “the distinction” uniquely illuminates. Moreover, Wittgenstein will also remind us that we often cannot say by what feature we identified our friends, though we have no trouble identifying them. So it is difficult to escape the conclusion that reasoning in tangled human affairs will involve judgments modifying the senses of the terms each party is using, while the terms themselves must be inherently *analogous* to be susceptible to such modification, which, once made, allows us to “reason together.” Now since we are doing this all the time, and some are better at it than others, the capacity to do so must be more “commonsensical” than “theoretical,” yet no less admirable for that.

Now to human freedom—lots of big issues here! I am sure, Bill, that “libertarian” views are multiple, so let me try to state what I find reprehensible in all of them with which I am acquainted, largely through their use.⁶ It is that free actions find their origin in the subject alone, so are more akin to initiating than to responding, which I take to be part of what moderns cherish in “autonomy.” Such a view finds its issue in “will power,” which I find to be either useless or self-defeating, as I shall show from your example. Acknowledging the role played by desire, which picks up my focus on the role of “the good,” you then insist:

[But] *it is we ourselves who determine, within the situation, what it is we most desire.* We do have some control, though not unlimited control, over the relative strengths of our various desires; one way we do this is by voluntarily directing our attention in this way rather than that. We [a] reinforce our perseverance in a difficult task by dwelling upon the goods to be realized by its accomplishment, and we [b] steel ourselves against temptation by deliberately banishing from our minds the thought of the pleasure that would result from a course of action we have recognized as being wrong or otherwise defective. (And of course, we may attempt to do either of these things, and fail in the attempt; that is an important ingredient in "weakness of will.")

I have been suggesting, however, that these are two quite different actions rather than simply being two ways we can act (in the sense of "*ourselves . . . determine*" what is to be done): (a) involves letting ourselves be lured by the *good* in question; while (b) requires that we push an apparent good away; so (b) is an example of "will-power," while (a) involves letting the lure of the good prevail. But it takes scant psychological insight to find that "steel[ing] ourselves against temptation by deliberately banishing from our minds the thought of the pleasure that would result from a course of action we have recognized as being wrong" is largely counterproductive; indeed, can easily serve to elicit just the wrong sorts of fantasies! In such matters, is it not more plausible to treat ourselves as we are instructed to assist children: instead of forbidding one thing, offer another in its place? That would confirm a responsive view of freedom while minimizing any pretense of control. If my view of *willing* cannot be something undertaken "on its own," as it were, but always involves an appreciation as well as multiple discriminations regarding the salient *good* in question, that does indeed argue for an intellectual dimension inherent to willing, closer to Aristotle and to Aquinas than to Scotus, at least as I have been able to understand him. That is what I mean by "responsive." As between these two views, one can only ask which one is closer to our ongoing experience. Part of my annoyance with the phrase "libertarian freedom" is that too many philosophers think it is simply an intensive way saying "free," whereas I want to tease out the theory imbedded in "libertarian" discourse, because I think it is a wrong one, for the reasons adduced here.

Now to the divine-human interaction, for genuine disagreement of a metaphysical sort, rather than phenomenological alternatives, will emerge here. I am construed as saying:

His most trenchant criticism is that the libertarian view *removes free creatures from the activity of the creator*, thus in effect "denying the universal scope of creation." This, he says, is an "essentially Mu'tazalite" view, referring to an early school of Islamic thought that was discredited in consequence of the relentless determinism embraced by Sunni Islam.

Let me expound a bit the Mu'tazalite view, for once I understood it, I was astounded to see it played out so clearly in the now-standard "free will defense" of human freedom in the face of a creator. The premise implicit in

Mu'tazalite teaching was that any genuine action had to be a creating; that is, an *ex nihilo* origination on the part of the subject in question. If that be the case, then free agents had to be the creators of their free actions, so to avoid any competition with the creator Mu'tazalites contended that God created everything *except* human actions. (Think here of standard formulations of the "free will defense," designed to distance a creator from the process.) This proved to be too much for Islamic thought and practice, since it removed an incredible amount of creation from the creator's purview. So another school of theology, the Ash'arites, won out, which I have shown (in *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions*) hardly promoted the stereotypical "relentless determinism embraced by Sunni Islam." But to have exposed the implicit Mu'tazalite premise will help us to counter Bill's charge that *determinism* is the inevitable result of involving the creator in human freedom.

Indeed, the very point of Sokolowski's "distinction" and of Kathryn Tanner's "non-contrastive agency" is to remove the inevitability of a "zero-sum game" between creator and creatures, which Hasker simply presumes to be the case. In other words—and this is the entire thrust of my provocative essay—he does not wince at treating the relation between creature and creator as parallel with that between two creatures:

the doctrine of creation, as interpreted by Burrell, entails that human actions are "created by God" in the sense that *God, and God alone, determines which actions shall be performed*. But once we see this clearly, it is evident that the doctrine of creation has been highjacked, stolen away and given a new meaning that is in no way implied in the original intention of the doctrine.

Note how quickly he presumes that to *create* is to *determine*. Parsing a statement of Kathryn Tanner (whose details I need not sign onto), he says:

This is as clear a statement of theological determinism as anyone could wish for, in spite of the fact that both Tanner and Burrell dislike the word "determinism." (Objecting to one's opponent's choice of terminology can sometimes seem to be a rather transparent strategy for avoiding discussion of a topic one dislikes.) The idea is that since God is creator, and thus on a "different level" from the human agent, the fact that it is ultimately God who decides what the human being shall do in no way detracts from her freedom "on the creaturely level."

Bill defines "theological determinism" as "determinism in which the relevant conditions have to do with the will and decrees of God." But why can't one rather follow the lead which he notes that I have given, and which is certainly part of "the original intention of the doctrine [of creation]," to wit: that creator and creatures are on decidedly "different levels," and if so, one cannot blithely conclude that "it is ultimately God who decides what the human being shall do," for that image suggests two deciders competing. The reason we (Kathryn Tanner and I) do not like to describe creation as "determining" is precisely because "determine" presumes a flat field of competing forces, but a God who would be the "ultimate" force

in a flat field of like forces, differing only in power, would be the “biggest thing around”; not the creator. Can I be blamed for being baffled that philosophers ostensibly writing in the Christian tradition spend so little time or effort to distinguish the activity of the creator from that of creatures?

Bill Hasker’s constructive reference to my argument proceeds in this way:

Furthermore, in sustaining her God sustains her causal powers, including the power to make choices such as the one that now lies before her. When she does choose, God adds his “concurrence” to her decision, enabling it to be carried out; [observing at this point in a note]: actually the need for a distinct divine act of concurrence is controversial; I include it here in order to present Burrell with the richest possible theistic account of libertarian choice.

Can anyone conceive how “God could add x to anything?” If this form of discourse is not idolatrous, what is? Indeed, the entire notion of *concursum*, like that of “determine,” presumes two modes of causality parallel to each other. Intending to serve me with a “richest possible theistic account,” Bill has undermined any way of acting proper to a creator.

If my arguments are too “contextual,” Barry Miller offers a properly austere account of “the relation between divine and creaturely causation,” suggesting that we employ the “opaque context” device: “God makes it to be the case that (I decide this way),” to manifest that the two causations are on different levels, and to suggest that the creaturely is dependent on the divine but not in a straightforward way, thus defusing charges of “determinism.”⁷ Whether this “works” or not, it at least makes a stab at presenting the ineffable creator/creature relation whereby, Aquinas insists, God can make it to be the case that creatures act freely.

How can we articulate what is going on here? By insisting that the relation between creator and creature must be *sui generis* to preserve the integrity of each, I am accused of not being clear enough, yet the only way to be clear, it seems, would be to treat the relationship as one within the world of creatures! But it has been my contention in this, and an earlier piece, that the “ideas that are typical of the analytic mainstream in philosophy of religion” are proposed in innocence of the history of Christian thought, in such a way that dispenses them from attending to that rich tradition. But how then can they claim then to be doing “Christian philosophy of religion?” Let me propose a suspicion of an answer, prompted by celebrating the feast of Pentecost at Abu Ghosh, a Benedictine abbey in the Holy Land. Rich in male and female voices, in the tones of oud and flute, incense and prostrations, this extended prayer addressed to God did not pretend to be conceptually adequate—else these things would be mere accoutrements, better dispensed with. But is not that what some strands of the Reformation actually tried to do, precisely by dispensing with symbol and gesture, music and allusion? So I asked myself: what if my form of worship were relentlessly verbal, word deprived of sacrament? Might that not lead me to presume the expressions uttered to be conceptually adequacy?

Would I not then presume, with Richard Cross, that when Aquinas spoke of the “meaning of a word predicated of ‘God’ and of ‘creatures’ as

one *res significata* (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 13, a. 3),” that he was speaking of “one concept, representing one perfection,” whereas what he actually says (as we have seen) is that “words like ‘good’ and ‘wise’ when used of God do signify something that God really is, but they signify it imperfectly because creatures represent God imperfectly.” Recall how the “representational” view makes it unthinkable to limit the use of “concept” to the *modus significandi*, since *what* these words signify must be a *concept*, for all knowing (and utterance) is grounded in representation. Yet if we privilege speaking *to* God over speaking *about* God, and if our characteristic way of speaking to God is mediated by symbol, gesture, and music, then it would seem equally natural to acknowledge that whatever linguistic vehicles we have will be inadequate in the face of the divine reality, but so what? For me, a rich liturgical context outweighs “the analytic mainstream in philosophy of religion,” especially as it becomes clear that the “clarity” which that party values will be bought at the price of denying the transcendence proper to a creator, the very “distinction” that Sokolowski finds omnipresent in early Christian thought and practice. So rapprochement there not seem to be, but others may profit from seeing differences sharpened, and from a richer variety of references than is customary in “the analytic mainstream in philosophy of religion,” and for this I must thank my interlocutors, for criticism is highest praise in doing philosophy.

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(21 June 2007)

NOTES

1. Rudi teVelde, *Aquinas on God: Divine Science of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 85, 177.

2. Robert M. Adams: “I believe that the most plausible form of the doctrine of divine necessity is the Thomistic view that God’s existence follows necessarily from his essence but that we do not understand God’s essence well enough to see how his existence follows from it.” “Divine Necessity,” *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983), reprinted as “Divine Necessity” in *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), chap. 14, p. 209.

3. Alexander Broadie, “Maimonides and Aquinas on Names of God,” *Religious Studies* 23 (1987).

4. John O’Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), see review by Richard Cross, *Journal of Theological Studies* 56 (2005): pp. 300–02.

5. For an illuminating introduction to the work of Pierre Hadot, see Arnold Davidson’s translation and collection of some key articles: *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

6. Editor’s Note: The editor reminded Fr. Burrell that some libertarian views explicitly incorporate his contention that our actions are more akin to responding than to initiating. (See, e.g., T. Flint, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 34.) Fr. Burrell graciously asked the editor to include this note acknowledging this fact.

7. *A Most Unlikely God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 133–37).