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Book Review: Secular Philosophy And The Religious Temperament Essays 2002-2008

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And unlike Kant, who saw no hope for achieving his *summum bonum* in the empirical world, Schleiermacher perceives that world as providing the setting in which selves can be transformed, so that contingent desires are coordinated by both the universal laws of reason and the empathetic valuation of individuality, thereby realizing the highest good of loving community.

In fact, through his religious commitments Schleiermacher sees this “ensoulment” of nature as not merely a possibility but an inevitable feature of the world’s history. The job of the ethicist is simply to describe this process. In chapter 7, Mariña looks at Schleiermacher’s theological view of Christ as the person whose perfected God-consciousness—constituted by the complete passivity of his human desires so that the divine reality at His root can express itself fully as universal love for humanity—transforms the community formed around Him. Because Schleiermacher saw the empirical world as the setting in which selves could impact and transform one another, he had the resources to articulate a Christology according to which Christ could effect the historic attainment of the highest good. But even apart from this theology, Mariña can use Schleiermacher’s discussion of Christ’s transforming impact to highlight how, within Schleiermacher’s thought, “contact with another person and incorporation into a community founded by such an individual can be the occasion for ethical transformation” (187).

In the final chapter, Mariña explores how Schleiermacher’s thought bears on religious pluralism. Here, the chief lesson is that different religions have positive value insofar as they can promote the kind of self-consciousness from which love springs.

Overall, this is an extraordinarily rich and provocative book deserving careful study. Those who pursue such study will be rewarded with not only a deeper understanding of Schleiermacher, but a deeper appreciation of philosophy’s potential to help us better understand ourselves and our world.

Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament: Essays 2002–2008, by Thomas Nagel. Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 171. \$27.95 (cloth).

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In an essay published in 2007 and titled, “A Time of Transition,” Jürgen Habermas offered this surprising estimation: “Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. . . . We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.”¹ Such a judgment, rendered by

¹Jürgen Habermas, “A Time of Transition,” published in Italian by Feltrinelli (2007)

one of Europe's most celebrated intellectuals and self proclaimed atheists, is to be understood as a reflection on cultural evolution in the West, and surely not evidence of Habermas's spiritual conversion.

Equally unexpected was an actual conversion recorded eighty years ago, when Evelyn Waugh chose the path to Rome. I should think many in the England of the time probably would have regarded Waugh as at most an agnostic. (His conversion to Roman Catholicism took place fifteen years before the publication of *Brideshead Revisited*). Charged by the press in 1930 as having been seduced by ritual, Waugh replied in print, in words remarkably close to those of Habermas. He said, "It seems to me that in the present phase of European history the essential issue is no longer between Catholicism, on one side, and Protestantism, on the other, but between Christianity and chaos. Civilization—and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe—has not in itself the power of survival. It came into being through Christianity, and without it has no significance or power to command allegiance."²

Thomas Nagel is a significant figure in contemporary philosophy, his contributions ranging with originality over fundamental issues in philosophy of mind, ethics, and political theory. The book under consideration here contains fifteen essays published in recent years, and devoted to persons and problems bearing on points of tension between and among the worlds of science, religion, politics, and philosophy. There are five essays in each of three parts. Part I is devoted to *Religion*, Part II to *Politics* and Part III to *Humanity*. Those who have benefited from other works by Nagel will find in these essays that clarity of thought and fairness of judgment characteristic of his approach to difficult issues. Although only 171 pages, the book qualifies as "thin but thick," something all too rare in this age of "thick but thin" treatises.

Perhaps the first question one might have on reading the title is just what Nagel takes a religious temperament to be and how it is to be distinguished from a secular perspective where the same matters are engaged. Granting the wide variety of religious experiences, Nagel offers as an element he takes to be common to most if not all: "The idea that there is some kind of all-encompassing mind or spiritual principle in addition to the minds of individual human beings and other creatures, and that this mind or spirit is the foundation of the existence of the universe, of the natural order, of value, and of our existence, nature, and purpose" (5).

By contrast, how might the secular temperament or perspective express itself when the "cosmic" questions arise?

The thoughts that we should transcend the life of a particular person by taking on the value of humanity, or the value of all rational beings as ends in themselves, or the value of all sentient life, are partial answers to the cosmic

²In Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts: Spiritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (London: Harper Collins, 1999), 166.

question. They go part of the way toward incorporating a cosmic point of view into the life of the individual, and they certainly embed that life in something larger. But they stop with the value of human (and other) life itself, which does not receive endorsement from some higher value. (11)

There is, to be sure, much more to the differences than is conveyed by these distillations, but it is useful to consider them in conjunction with the passages from Habermas and Waugh. If the conclusions reached by Habermas and Waugh are correct regarding the primary source of Western civilization, then there is surely a direct link between at least one version of the central idea on which the religious and secular temperaments are grounded and the colossal achievements—scientific, artistic, political and moral—of Western civilization itself. After all, taking any question as “cosmic” and understanding it in terms that entail duties transcending our merely personal desires must stand as at least an intimation of a realm of “higher value.” On this point, it would seem to matter very little whether the “order” of the cosmos impelling one toward such understanding is James’s “unseen” or Nagel’s “seen” (11). To put it another way, it would seem to make little difference whether the vision were that of Plato or of Epicurus.

At this point, one is tempted to be argumentative. One might press a further distinction and wonder if the real tension is finally not between secular philosophy and the religious temperament, but between *secularism* (as doctrinal and orthodox) and a particular specimen of civilization—namely, Western civilization. Nagel would seem to be sympathetic to this framing of the question. He pays compliments to Richard Dawkins as a science writer, but joins the choir of the informed in giving low marks to *The God Delusion* and comparably undiscerning offerings. One might nonetheless complain that Nagel’s pages feature no leading representative of the religious temperament. One might complain further that this *temperament* (the very choice of the word leaving little room for rationally grounded convictions) often arises from sustained and critical reflection.

The connection defended by Waugh and Habermas is not merely contingent or correlative, but is understood to be basic and causally efficacious. The perfectionist ideals inherited from classical sources, refined by a unique conception of universal brotherhood and the dignity of every person, created and nurtured understandings that would define the West. Under favoring conditions, the human potential would reveal itself in its fullness. Rejected is all variety of scientific attempts to reduce a world of wonder to matter in motion; secularist attempts to tie the dignity of the person to some quirk in the chemistry of life. Recall Matthew Arnold’s comment on Darwin’s identification (in *The Descent of Man*) of our evolutionary next of kin—the “hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears.” Granting as much, Arnold noted that there nonetheless was something in that creature that “inclined him to Greek.” Nagel has a robust and praiseworthy respect for the wide gap separating actually lived life and the seminar room. That respect is sometimes honored less fully in these pages than in his scholarly books and major essays.

Avoiding the complexities of the story gives this collection one of its most appealing features, its accessibility. In some places the reader is well served; in others somewhat misled. The essays on Dawkins and on Intelligent Design could have been brought to a properly abrupt conclusion with some assistance from Kant's paralogisms and antinomies. The same may be said of the essay on "Why there is anything." The chapter on "Public Education and Intelligent Design" is lengthy, though the representation of the issues remains too thin. Nagel would have the religious perspective divorcing itself from a "non-law governed cause" (43) and therefore subject to some degree of scientific appraisal by way of evidence. Perhaps. But consider this: Granting the "big bang" as the best of the theoretical options now on offer, what is to be made of the fact that all the laws of physics arrived with the "bang" itself? Aristotle put it more directly in the *Physics*: "If the art of shipbuilding were in the wood, there would be ships by nature."

As for the pages in Part I devoted to Nietzsche, I treat myself to a small wager on works whose current celebrity will amaze a less distracted world. Nietzsche's are in the top 10. In compiling the list I am guided by Thomas Reid's useful reminder: "Theories and conjectures are the creatures of men."

But what again of the "cosmic" questions and the issues arising from our answers to them? Readers, as students, are predictably impatient when discovering just what it is that makes the eternal questions eternal! The beliefs we hold about that which in principle transcends the very possibility of experience cannot be vindicated or defeated by modes of inquiry and explanation that require or presuppose experiential forms of evidence. If the debate has any continuing value it is as an aid to reason as it accepts the burden of disciplining itself. That, finally, is why there may be good service done in science education by raising the question of "intelligent design."

Part II begins with "The problem of global justice." It is instructive to consider these pages carefully, for they illustrate a tendency in all of the essays (e. g. chapter 8 on Anthony Appiah's "Rooted Cosmopolitanism") to derive benefits from assumptions otherwise treated as of questionable validity. The conception and administration of justice around the world vary greatly. Policies and practices integral to the life of one community are judged in others as degraded and even sinful. Meanwhile, all the right people reject "imperialism" and affirm secularism. No set of values can be of *provably* greater moral worth than any others, for the ultimate calculus is local in place and traditional in origin. But what then of those allegedly "universal" human rights? What of all the courts that keep springing up to secure them and to punish transgressors? Nagel answers: "The normative force of the most basic human rights against violence, enslavement, and coercion, and of the most basic humanitarian duties of rescue from immediate danger, depends only on our capacity to put ourselves in other people's shoes" (26).

But this is entirely unhelpful. The religiously devout believer may well regard a person as a slave to various addictions. And what is of greater or more immediate danger than the prospect of losing one's soul? The point, of course, is that what ends up going into someone else's shoes typically is *our own feet!* Different persons carry with them any number of core values, convictions, and commitments to improve or save or, alas, destroy the world. The normative force on which the identification and implementation of rights draws strength is inextricably bound up with more fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of human nature itself and the conditions most likely to realize the best that is imminent in it.

In matters of this sort, the distinction that needs to be pressed is between understanding and justification. One puts oneself in the shoes of another to gain some understanding as to why that other thinks, feels and behaves in a certain way. We do the same in order to understand what another may be suffering or desiring. Quite apart from empathy and sympathy, however, there is the different burden of judgment: *What course of action is called for in this circumstance?* Again, to address this question we finally must be standing in our own shoes.

In the succeeding chapter Nagel offers a few pages on Jeremy Rabkin's *Law without Nations?* The issue is that of sovereignty, but with neither Nagel nor Rabkin benefiting from informed analyses of the concept of sovereignty itself. In the constitutional jurisprudence of the United States, for example—and thanks in large measure to James Wilson and the Founding generation—sovereignty is understood to be in the *person* and only derivatively in the state. Had this understanding been considered, the gloss on Rabkin might have been merged with the preceding chapter, the issue of global justice, but now examined under a clearer light.

There are kindred problems as Nagel moves to the writing of Michael Sandel, a widely cited “progressive” who would have (what he takes to be) the common good granted greater importance than that enjoyed under traditional liberal conceptions of individual liberty. Perhaps inspired by Sandel's often insinuating turns of phrase (“The Christian Coalition and similar groups seek to clothe the naked public square with narrow, intolerant moralisms”), Nagel serves up his own tribute to *academic correctness* when he cites “the Bush administration's contempt for the rule of law and its attempts to evade the limits on executive power, under the color of the war on terror” (110). Of course, it should go without saying that, if a persistent political value in American society were to impose severe limits on executive power, the progressive movement itself could find no safe haven within national politics. Positions such as Sandel's have difficulty finding comfort zones. Remember Domitian who took care of those troublesome Christians and Jews with their intolerant moralisms. But remember, too, that Domitian had sufficient conviction left over to rid Rome of philosophers as well. It's best to be careful about these things.

The final section, *Humanity*, features three luminous essays, two of them devoted to Bernard Williams and another to David Wiggins. There

are two additional essays (Sartre and the problem of other minds, and O'Shaughnessy on non-conscious contributions to experience) of lesser appeal. If a major section reflecting on contemporary philosophy credibly has "Humanity" in its title, both Williams and Wiggins deserve both inclusion and praise. With Williams, one finds the ideal antagonist, the tutor with all the right and challenging questions, all the supple and adaptable reflexes that a life in philosophy promises to cultivate—but rarely does. To be the joyful victim of his insightful criticisms is to earn an enduring debt. David Wiggins, to those who know him well, thinks of issues with what is best described as *purity*—all contaminants removed, the essence now reduced and rendered all the more fortifying. The point of contact reached in the ethical works of Williams and Wiggins is actually *lived life*, in its complexity, its resistance to formula, its vexing ability to outfox the apparatus of the school room. Many, this reviewer among them, require more of morality than Williams allows or Wiggins supplies. Yet, it is in this that they stand as moral teachers, insisting that others now present arguments supporting any claim to be seeing more.

Nagel has given readers a nice sample of his thinking on matters large and not so large. As with any work in this *genre*, it is less a book than a collection of outlines for books the author has written or clearly could write. Nagel is controlled in his passions, teasingly unsuccessful in attempts to conceal his prejudices—his *temperament*. He never does reach a fuller understanding of that religious temperament that might be rightly paired with secular philosophy, nor does he test with judicious disinterest the temperament that marks out the secular. But good questions are raised and useful hints provided. There will be more from Thomas Nagel, and it will be welcome.

Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity, by Nelson Maldonado-Torres. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. xvi + 342. \$84.95 (cloth), \$23.95 (paper).

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Nelson Maldonado-Torres draws on the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Frantz Fanon, and Enrique Dussel, who "make explicit the subtle complicities between dominant [Eurocentric] epistemological and anthropological ideals and the exercise of violence" (237). The general notion seems to be that when autonomous individuals (monads, transcendental egos, or the like) undertake epistemology as the quest for the knowledge of objects, then the resulting focus on the ontology of things inevitably denigrates the subjective Other. When epistemology and metaphysics trump ethics, human relations become secondary. Thus it is no accident that *cogito ergo sum* emerged in the immediate wake of *ego conquiro*. The