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## Peter Forrest, INTELLECTUAL, HUMANIST AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT: ACTS OF ASSENT

Brendan Sweetman

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thoughtful. The aim at making a volume accessible to the lay reader generally hits his mark: the tone of the major pieces is refreshingly casual, and often funny. Further, the story that the volume tells as a whole is informative and interesting, an extremely challenging mark to hit when collecting essays from diverse authors. In taking such a wide scope, it gives both beginners and experts food for thought. In a discipline that too often falls prey to silos and narrow questions, this series and this volume are welcome additions.

*Intellectual, Humanist and Religious Commitment: Acts of Assent*, by Peter Forrest. Bloomsbury Academic. 2019. Pp. 208. \$153 (hardcover).

BRENDAN SWEETMAN, Rockhurst University

When I was an undergraduate in Dublin studying the philosophy of religion, there was a student who would constantly invent radical views of God and creation in order to show that we could go beyond traditional accounts, solve stubborn problems along the way, and still arrive at an outlook that was plausible and defensible. Over tea and doughnuts, we argued fiercely about whether his strange views were (refreshingly!) original and plausible, or outrageous speculations that served only to stimulate reflection about the nature of God and creation. The present book may be regarded as an extremely sophisticated version of this approach. Building upon Forrest's earlier work, this study is an addition to the recent literature on fideism that we have seen in such thinkers as John Leslie and John Bishop, whose work follows the general approach of William James.

Forrest's argument throughout is intricate and involved; there are lots of pieces, many of which (as he admits) can be described as speculations that are not very well developed, and, we must add, not convincingly defended. Nevertheless, the book exhibits complex philosophizing and clever insights, and offers what some will see as an intriguing set of suggestions with regard to perennial issues. The author's approach is a kind of hybrid of contemporary analytic philosophy and process philosophy, especially in the conception of God that emerges from these pages, for he suggests that initially god does not have a moral character but eventually develops into a being worthy of worship and so becomes God. In Chapters 1 and 2, Forrest starts from the position that he believes afflicts the modern intellectual world—the loss of “epistemic innocence,” where innocence refers to the state of believing without critical reflection. In



response to this loss of innocence, he proceeds to defend the following commitments: (i) to reason, by which he means ordinary human ways of seeking true beliefs; (ii) to humanism (which includes scientific realism); and (iii) to a God worthy of worship. He argues throughout the rest of the book that these positions are reasonable, and so one can commit to them, though he does not go so far as to say that it is unreasonable not to commit to them (so agnosticism, but not atheism, might be reasonable). Interestingly, he rejects reformed epistemology as a response to the loss of epistemic innocence for two reasons. The first is that the interpretation of religious experiences appealed to in reformed epistemology is always controversial and theory-laden, and the second is that we end up with religious pluralism on this approach since the Aquinas-Calvin model extends to any religion that teaches divine inspiration.

Under the influence of William James, Forrest argues in Chapters 3 and 4 that reasonable commitment must satisfy three necessary conditions, which he tentatively puts forward as jointly sufficient. These are (i) the dilemma condition: the circumstances of a commitment should be an intellectual dilemma, with good arguments for and against the thesis to which commitment is made; (ii) the pragmatic condition: we should only commit on matters that have good practical consequences; and (iii) the absolute superiority condition: the content of the commitment should be better than rival commitments. This last condition means that the thesis committed to is absolutely better than rival theses, not just better for an individual, but better without qualification. This condition also relies upon a notion called *axiarchism* (inspired by Leslie), the Platonist principle that one—and perhaps the only ultimate—way of understanding is to be aware of the good, including the beautiful. This principle seems to apply particularly to theism, Forrest claims, and it may be conjoined with the rationalist principle that the understanding is the guide to truth, which relies upon ordinary human ways of knowing (which he describes as “core epistemology”; it includes inference to the best explanation and the principle of sufficient reason). Understanding, he suggests, is both an aesthetic experience and a guide to truth. Nevertheless, while one could agree that understanding might involve an experience that is somewhat aesthetic, and also that understanding can be a guide to truth, Forrest does not consider the fact that one may have the aesthetic experience from falsehood. He also denies that his arguments for the conditions end up being circular (since he appears to be using reason to argue for a commitment to reasoning). One can appeal to the (dubious?) method of reflective equilibrium, he thinks, to ground one’s commitment in the sense that the judgments of particular cases both support and are supported by the general rules of reasoning, but there is no circularity in relying upon particular judgments prior to the formulation of the general rules. This reply is surely too brief and it is hard to see how Forrest avoids the charge that he is using reason to arrive at the three conditions and then having the

conditions justify a commitment to reason (along with the commitments to humanism and theism). Commitment to reason is further justified, he claims, because of its success in handling reality.

The absolute superiority condition is important for his overall case because he believes it enables us to avoid a pluralism of commitments based on different pragmatic considerations, which he takes to be an implausible position (one James ended up embracing). Pluralism is here understood to mean the view that different people with no relevant difference in experience, ability, or wisdom can reasonably reach opposing conclusions. Forrest claims that disagreements among intellectual peers are ultimately due to different judgments of value—the theist holds that her commitment is to the view with the most value. It is a reasonable commitment, and there is nothing more one can do to convince those who reject the value judgment. Our key disagreements are not therefore intellectual, even though we often mistakenly think they are. The author accepts that sometimes a commitment and a suspension of judgment can both be reasonable but, in most cases, he rejects pluralism and the absolute superiority condition is supposed to allow him to avoid sanctioning the reasonability of a pluralism of commitments.

His general position then (developed in chapters 5 and 6) is that these conditions in turn justify commitment to modified scientific realism, a commitment that acknowledges the fallible nature of science. However, commitment to naturalism is not reasonable because it requires atheism to support it, not the other way around. He appears to have no serious answer to the objection that we should commit to naturalism because of the success of science. A commitment to humanism then is also justified (and required) as a preliminary to his argument for theism. Commitment to humanism involves accepting five theses, in what seems like a Rawlsian fashion—we don't have to argue for them, but they fit well with liberal sensibilities. These five theses are: (i) a commitment to absolute values (there are things that are objectively valuable in themselves); (ii) some things are absolutely better than others; (iii) a commitment to freedom and moral responsibility; (iv) there is a human telos, which is to love and to understand; and (v) all persons are equal. This is what he means by humanism, with the telos not being understood in any specific, Aristotelian sense. Here, Forrest is open to a charge of relativism unless we already have a specific theory of value in place to define what love amounts to.

Although humanism is often regarded negatively by theists, Forrest is advocating religion within the bounds of humanism. The author considers objections along the way and argues that commitment to some version of these five claims satisfies his earlier criteria, and so commitment to humanism (and then theism) overall is reasonable, given the balance of evidence. Secular humanism would involve the acceptance of two additional theses, belief in unaided progress and rejection of religion and the afterlife. However, secular humanism does not satisfy the absolute

superiority condition—there is nothing absolutely superior about living as if there is neither God nor an afterlife. If secular humanists deny this, they are stuck with pluralism and probably relativism as well (which Forrest has earlier rejected). And so, as long as theism can be shown to be reasonable (that is, it satisfies the dilemma condition), then it is better than atheism because of the absolute superiority condition.

In Chapter 7, the author develops the argument that we can move from humanist commitment to commitment to god, where god is the primordial cosmic agent. He defends the existence of god by relying upon standard arguments from natural theology (which, though inconclusive, are still adequate for commitment). Influenced by the process approach, and also by a rejection of any radical dualistic separation of the mental from the physical, he regards god as an embodied cosmic mind who has awareness of multi-universes, which are gradually reduced by divine action, in utilitarian fashion, to the best ones as a way of promoting the most good. Eventually, we evolve to a lawful universe and an objective moral order, both of which are accessible to reason. “The god,” he says, “will act in this way out of regard for what is good even though not yet bound by ethical rules” (127). Both axiarchism and the truth of theism explain why the universe ends up the way it does, he claims. Theism would also explain why our universe appears fine-tuned for life. He rejects the classical view, which he describes as “omni-God,” because it is very vulnerable to the problem of evil. He also rejects a mainstream process view because this conception of god is too weak. The way to reconcile these views is to speculate that initially god is not good enough to be God.

Forrest expands upon this speculative account in Chapter 8. There, he argues that given that god created the universe, it is plausible that god retains enough power to be God (that is, to be worthy of worship). The problem of evil is a serious objection to the claim that god could develop morally into a being that is worthy of worship. This problem can make commitment to theism seem implausible, and so the hypothesis of theism may fail to satisfy the dilemma condition. The author claims that god is initially motivated by aesthetic considerations (and so creates a universe where god decides not to break the natural laws), but later develops a moral character in response to the creatures that emerge in creation. Only then does god welcome a relationship of mutual love with these creatures and so over time becomes God. The moral development of the collective of humanity, and of free individual humans, are incommensurable values, and Forrest argues that our experiences show us that god most likely set up creation so that eventually it will be governed by certain values being promoted over others. These include free people eventually moderating their freedom in relationship with others, the aesthetic value of mathematically elegant laws admitting no exceptions, and great joy even if it takes a long time to arrive. The lesser (though not unimportant) values include the absence of suffering, the promotion of equality, and having a good life here and now. We should

think of god initially as acting in a utilitarian way, attracted mainly by aesthetic considerations, and promoting the overall good even if this allows acts of suffering along the way, until god later develops moral character.

Yet, Forrest seems to equivocate between saying god has no moral character, and saying that god does not have a morally perfect character. There is another premise which he seems to just help himself to—namely, that the reason god moves toward a moral character is because he is attracted to the good and repelled by the bad. We are not told why this is so, and it sounds as if god may have a moral character after all! It is troubling that his view is suffused throughout with an appeal to values to move it in the correct modern direction, but these values are never clearly justified. For example, the absolute superiority condition does not seem to me to work unless we first define what the good means. But why define it in one way rather than another? And can we utilize the concept without smuggling in a moral dimension (ours, of course, which would then define the way God must turn out)? Many will also find his response to the problem of evil unsatisfactory because it is difficult to accept god acting in any kind of utilitarian way. To defend such a view he is forced to speculate that initially god had no moral character, and also locked himself into a lawful universe (one in which he decided not to intervene) for aesthetic reasons (and so this would explain why there is so much evil), a position some will no doubt regard as throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Forrest completes the picture by suggesting that evil is not such that it makes any life not worth living, is compensated for in the afterlife, and that we should (and do?) forgive God for the earlier evils. The claim that all of this is supposed to be compatible with an embodied god also strains credulity.

Overall, Forrest needs too many premises and speculative hypotheses, and several seemingly ad hoc moves to tell a coherent story. One struggles to see how the parts fit together, and there is a worry that several slights of hand may be in play in the form of helping himself to values and claims that he does not justify. Some may regard this work as a valiant, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to defend a commitment to theism. Atheists may see it as whistling in the wind to save theism, given modern sensibilities which he accepts with little question, and which many theists would doubt (or at least modify). Many will find the argument speculative, unnecessarily complicated and, in its overall progression, too often anemic, perhaps to the point of bemusement. Yet, I found this book a challenging and entertaining jaunt that is both fascinating and full of genuine insight. It will likely not be convincing to many, and some may not have the patience to stay with it to the end, but I recommend it for an alternative view of many key questions that continue to fascinate in the philosophy of religion, especially concerning the nature of God.