BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Robert MacSwain: *Solved by Sacrifice: Austin Farrer, Fideism, and the Evidence of Faith*. Studies in Philosophical Theology 51. Peeters 2013.

The work of Austin Farrer (1904-68), an important figure in twentieth-century English theology, was of particular intellectual complexity, for it ranged from Biblical exegesis to theoretical philosophy to theology. MacSwain thus weaves his presentation with multiple lines of investigation. His interpretive key is not Farrer's metaphysical thought but rather his epistemological apparatus. The backbone of his synthetic overview of Farrer's mature thought is this central thesis: Farrer's conception of religious faith is to be understood as spiritual praxis, i.e. the performative efficacy of religious faith present in the lives of 'saints'. This efficacy serves as the evidence that renders genuine religious faith possible.

This thesis allows MacSwain to stake out a perspective that is simultaneously extremely interesting and also incisive, since it incorporates all the various stages of Farrer's approach to religious faith. MacSwain's monograph reveals that Farrer's cultural horizons are broad enough to encompass all of the most salient lines of philosophical debate that emerged throughout the twentieth century. Within this horizon, all the themes developed are filtered through a mental disposition typical of Farrer, which serves as a unifying force in MacSwain's wide-ranging investigation. This is the notion of *fideism*, which MacSwain first defines with precision and then adopts as the interpretive key to explicate the philosophical system put in place by the English theologian. That mental disposition is delineated thus: when faced with the great problems posed by both religious faith and human experience, MacSwain underlines Farrer's conviction of 'the need to act *without* complete certainty, combined with a sense that

some knowledge can only be gained from *within* a certain perspective or tradition, rather than "looking at things from outside'" (p. 104).

MacSwain begins by problematizing fideism and offering critical insight into its possible variants. Fideism is the view that posits faith as a necessary precondition for evaluating the rationality of those beliefs that delineate this horizon. Thus it is unsurprising that the resulting variants are so disparate. On one side there is extreme fideism (religious faith demands the acceptance of beliefs that are contrary to reason: *credo quia absurdum*); on the other side there is moderate fideism (to which the author essentially traces Farrer's epistemological system). Moderate fideism holds that reason is not opposed to faith, but rather has an auxiliary role in ascertaining the truth in one's own belief. Intrinsic to this way of imposing the theme of the relationship between belief and knowledge is the emergence of another question concerning the intrinsic intelligibility of religious faith. That is to be ascertained not only within the horizon of belief but also on a universal level, according to criteria of intelligibility that are shareable among all.

Now, in an attempt to situate Farrer's epistemological apparatus, MacSwain introduces a sort of middle road between the rationalism of natural theology and the irrationalism of extreme fideism. Farrer's is presented as a sort of 'soft rationalism', characterized by three criteria: 1) religious faith should be judged as a global theory, or as a worldview; 2) the judgment of that global theory is never the object of simple demonstration or strictly demonstrative reasoning; and 3) such a judgment, of an unquestionably rational character, presents its argumentative structure as deriving from an accumulation of evidence (cumulative-case argument).

Moving then from fideism as such to Farrer, MacSwain shows that Farrer was convinced that knowledge of the divine is accessed not through demonstrative procedures, but rather through 'contemplation', i.e. a kind of appreciative intuition (direct apprehension) that grasps not only the simple givenness of an entity (the divine), but also its value for the existence of him who is drawn to it. Essentially, the way to access the divine is more like the model of apprehension than of inference. And that is not an isolated case for Farrer, limited to religious knowledge, but is rather his typical epistemological approach.

In this vein, Farrer is able to pose the following question in his *Saving Belief* (1964): can a rational mind think theologically? The question is approached first of all from the perspective of reason. But even this occurs from within the adherence to belief, which is a performative commitment to a reality that becomes accessible through a gift of salvific import. Essentially, faith in general is an attitude of the human mind that precedes critical reflection on the attitude itself and on the belief prompted by it. What is specific in religious faith is that it contains the belief in the existence of its object; which, when properly understood, can only be obtained by approximation to its incidence in the real world of life. Only in the wake of such an explication is it possible to work critically on the epistemic credentials of religious faith.

To this end Farrer undertakes a careful examination and distinguishes between 'initial faith' and 'saving faith', or better, between implicit and mature faith. The former is ultimately an image of the world, a sort of existential attitude. But this attitude remains sterile until one develops salvific faith, the very one that determines its own world of life. Hence Farrer stipulates the priority and the necessity of faith as an epistemological screen without which the evidence of God is not convincing (in one's mental life) and is not operational (in the world of life). Nonetheless, faith of salvific kind still needs evidence, needs rational exercise that is equipped to provide reasons for its intelligibility. It is from this perspective that MacSwain qualifies Farrer's perspective as moderate fideism, and defines his epistemology of religious faith as interactional. All this signifies that theistic evidence is not to be located in the sphere of pure reason, but rather in the life of 'saints' or in the efforts one makes in living one's own faith.

What then, MacSwain asks at the book's conclusion, is the significance of Farrer for contemporary religious epistemology? On one hand, a rigorously empirical criterion used to ascertain factual truth does not have a place in theistic belief. But the empirical requirement must be satisfied. Actually, physical objects are not how they appear, but rather how they act on us. To know God means to know something real with which we are in a relationship of interaction. Because, in order to know real beings, we must enjoy an effective relationship with them. Now, into what sort of relationship can be entered, when we are concerned with God? To obey, responds Farrer, i.e. to open ourselves to his action that we hold he discloses to us. This is the

experiential proof or verification in religious faith. In other words, we can touch God only by opening ourselves to him, we can enter into an interactive relationship with God only by willing his will. If then we want an experimental knowledge of God, argues Farrer, we must submit our will to God. The familiarity needed for interaction represents the extension of the empirical principle applied to spiritual realities. The way to reach God is through obedience, not through logical argumentation. Interaction and estimation lead to the affirmation of the existence of God as a personal reality with whom we have to do. And this, perhaps, is the synthesis that gathers up all of the philosophical work of a thinker of the stature of Austin Farrer.

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Kevin Timpe: *Free Will in Philosophical Theology*. Bloomsbury 2014.

Kevin Timpe's *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* is an impressive and scholarly book that ought to be read by all those with an interest in free will and philosophical theology. The premise of the book, as the title suggests, is to investigate free will in philosophical theology. Somewhat disappointingly the book only concerns free will in Christian philosophical theology. Timpe is explicit that his book will only be concerned with *Christian* philosophical theology, but it seems that the title of the book could easily have include this qualification without becoming cumbersome. This doesn't take away from the fact that Timpe's book is still very much still worth reading. It is, as far as I know, the only book to focus exclusively on the role that free will plays in Christian philosophical theology. It is not only of interest to scholars of free will and philosophical theological, but might also serve as a good introduction for those who wish to know more about free will in (Christian) philosophical theology.

Timpe's goal in the book is to 'tell a theological story philosophically' (p. 3) — that is, he wishes to show how a particular understanding of free will helps to solve certain puzzles in Christian theology. These are: primal sin (the first sin or act of evil), the role and nature of God's grace, freedom in heaven and hell, and divine freedom.