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THE GENESIS OF CONCEPTS AND THE CONFRONTATION OF RATIONALITIES

THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

LOUVAIN-LA-NEUVE, 7th-9th OCTOBER 2015

EDITED BY

JOSEPH FAMERÉE – PAULO RODRIGUES

PEETERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE (Joseph FAMERÉE)	VII
MOT D'ACCUEIL (Éric GAZIAUX)	XI

PART ONE FUNDAMENTAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE

Benoît BOURGINE (Louvain-la-Neuve) La rationalité de la théologie	3
John MCCARTHY (Chicago, IL) Theological Understanding and Thinking God	15
Peter VERDÉE (Louvain-la-Neuve) The Limitations of Formal Methods: From Ladrière's Views to Pragmatic Foundations	25
Daniel J. MCKAUGHAN (Boston, MA) Science and Stance Refinement from within a Tradition: Common Sense Realism, Empiricism, Physicalism, and Undogmatic Faith	57
Thierry MAGNIN (Lyon) Épistémologie de la physique quantique et incomplétude du physicien à la recherche du réel	79

PART TWO TEMPORALITY

Geert VAN OYEN (Louvain-la-Neuve) Some Reflections on Time in the Bible	91
Alexandre GUAY (Louvain-la-Neuve) La philosophie de la physique sans le temps	105
Dennis D. MCCARTHY (Washington, DC) Astronomy and Temporality	123

Denis FOREST (Paris)	
Who Am I? Questions for Contemporary Psychology and Brain Science	139

PART THREE FREEDOM

Susan ROSS (Chicago, IL)	
Freedom from a Theological Perspective	155
Bernard FELTZ (Louvain-la-Neuve)	
Neural Plasticity and Free Will	169
Renaud RONSSE – Philippe LEFEVRE (Louvain-la-Neuve)	
Bio-Inspired Robotics: From Rehabilitation to Human Augmentation.....	191
Mark HUNYADI (Louvain-la-Neuve)	
Confrontation ou fragmentation des rationalités?	209

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

Jean-Michel COUNET (Louvain-la-Neuve)	
Some Reflections on Theology, Science and Philosophy as Modes of Rationality.....	219
Annemarie C. MAYER (Leuven)	
A Theological Perspective on the Conference	227
Paulo RODRIGUES (Louvain-la-Neuve)	
Postface	237
INDEX OF NAMES	241

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGY, SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY AS MODES OF RATIONALITY

I. MULTIPLE RATIONALITIES AND METHODS

One thing is as sure as death and taxes: theology, philosophy and the sciences are all rational disciplines. They ask questions and try to answer them; they look for explanations; they are based on concepts, logic, and specific languages; they use established methodologies.

Yet, each is rational in its own way. I would like to distinguish between two types of discourse in this work. The first, the discourse of the sciences and technology, is usually formal, or can be formalized, and aims at establishing an operation-oriented description of the world, i.e. one that allows for others to act upon it. The second kind deals with art, religions, myths, etc.: it was present at the dawn of humanity and still maintains a role within our current technological age. Let us call this kind of discourse “meaningful discourse” because it conveys questions and reflections on the meaning of life, on humankind’s place within the cosmos, and the reasons behind why certain events have occurred.

Scientific and technological discourses implement their own specific methodology, usually referred to as the “scientific method”; it implies scientific objectivity (the individual subject with his emotions and peculiarities is set aside for the sake of universality and axiological neutrality) and the studied object’s determinate limits; each science investigates a field of its own and loses its relevance within other fields of reality. Science is also critical in that it uses argumentation to sustain its theses, which can then be rationally challenged by others in the future; objections have to be taken into account and addressed. Finally, as mentioned earlier, science’s discourse aims at some kind of action upon reality.

Contrastingly, meaningful discourse is open to reality as a whole: asking for the meaning of things is to consider one’s place within this reality; scientific objectivity is definitely irrelevant. There is also no need for critical arguments: meaningful discourse usually proceeds from simple assertions that are allegedly able to stand on their own and by the light they shed on certain complicated or difficult questions. Their aims are various: the creation of art works, the justification of rites and ethical habits, the elucidation of enigmatic situations, the arousal of emotions, etc.

II. ARTICULATION OF BOTH KINDS OF DISCOURSE: THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

Today, the question has become: how to hold together and articulate these two distinct types of discourse, because, as we can see, they do not share many properties, except that they are both rational? Since the 18th century, scientific and technological discourses have predominated and, even now, in one sense, continue to maintain the upper hand. "Meaningful discourse", however very important for humankind, is always seeking answers to urgent existential issues.

Philosophy, in my opinion, is a mediating discipline that exists in the space between these two rival discourses because it possesses a critical nature, like scientific and technological discourse (philosophy has to justify its assertions through rational arguments), but it is open to reality as a whole, like meaningful discourse (philosophical questions deal with any issue and, more radically, with the problem of reality as such: why is there anything rather than nothing?). Philosophy uses its own methodology, which is neither the scientific method nor the usual means of meaningful discourse; its method might be called "reflexivity", which implies the ability to include oneself as a questioner in the issue considered. Far from putting the observer aside, as with the scientific method, the reflexive philosopher is always involved in his questioning stance.

III. THE PHILOSOPHY'S REFLEXIVITY

The reflexive character of philosophy places some constraints on both philosophical discourse and declarations; the content of an assertion has to be compatible with the asserted fact in order to avoid performative contradictions. By saying, for example, "there is no truth," one becomes contradictory because whoever pronounces such a sentence thereby claims to be stating a truth. As such, philosophy must be rigorous in order to avoid not only explicit contradictions, i.e. contradictions of content, but also implicit or performative contradictions. Before putting any thesis forward, the philosopher must wonder whether it really applies to his or her own case. The point is particularly touchy if we recall that logical paradoxes are easily generated by reflexive stances. The barber paradox, the liar paradox, and Russell's paradox, for example, are all based on reflexivity. Gödel has shown how important reflexivity is in bringing to light the intrinsic limits of formal

languages¹. It is of an utmost importance to guarantee that the philosophical method be as rigorous and exacting as the scientific one, although it is not quite the same.

IV. PHILOSOPHY AS A MEDIATION

The current need for philosophy as a method for mediation is particularly urgent because the confrontation between scientific and – in a word – religious discourses is getting tenser and can turn into a definite struggle, especially if no mediation seems available. Presently, a religious stance closed to all philosophical enlightenment is often accused of fideism or fundamentalism and likely deserves these charges. Similarly, a branch of science not making room for philosophical questions falls into mere scientism and starts to exclude other relationships to truth. Philosophy may explain, for instance, that the truth to which science and religion both refer is not the same: science longs for exactitude and accuracy, while religion instead has a significant message in mind, a truth giving human life its meaning – and that has little to do with exactitude.

Without philosophy, science and religion are left without any common language: with no substantial connection, these two worlds are doomed to mutual misunderstanding, ignorance of their alter ego, and a growing mutual hostility. Philosophy therefore plays a key role within society; we might refer to the discipline's civic role in the sense that it actively contributes to the unity of the social body by combining elements of a common language between the two main intellectual streams of human culture. It comes as no surprise that some countries, such as Belgium, speak of introducing philosophy into a few secondary school programs, where it has so far remained conspicuously absent.

V. A STATUS FOR THEOLOGY

From this perspective, theology may be considered the intersection between religious discourse and philosophy. Theology is therefore the critical state of religious belief, where it gains access to reflexivity and a rational analysis of its own contents and attitudes. Thus, theology's mission is to consider religion's message as addressed to the contemporary

1. See D.R. HOFSTADTER, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, New York, Basic Books, 1979.

world: is it relevant? Is it sufficiently attuned to modern society? What is the image of God as conveyed by religious discourse? Does it provide a real incentive for one considering conversion? Does it give faith a reasonable look? These are the classical questions that often get addressed to one taking a theological perspective. In addition, theology should also consider the following contemporary challenge: is it true that we maintain contact with reality through religion? Art, language, and science are all symbolic forms that allow men and women to encounter the world, an important feature that justifies the existence of these great fields of human culture. Public opinion generally holds these disciplines in high esteem and considers them worthwhile. Yet, people are currently rather sceptical about religion: does it also connect us to the “real world”? Many would answer no. Modern theologians therefore face an important challenge in making themselves understood and convincing public opinion that religion, like the arts and sciences, puts us in touch with reality as a whole.

VI. SOME MOTION IN THE LANDSCAPE

The 20th century saw a great number of transitions. The arts, for example, became increasingly philosophical, with provocative works by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Pablo Picasso all conveying puzzling opinions about the essence and role of their work. The exposure of simple mass-produced objects as artistic masterpieces leads one to ask the question: what differentiates an art work from any ordinary object? Is it simply the human will considering it so or is there something else warranting its “artistic” quality? For example, Picasso painted different representations of the same object on the same picture, but from varying points of view – which are mutually incompatible – in an attempt to show us reality’s hidden dimension. According to Picasso, art has the task of making us see the invisible, which he tried to achieve through cubism, and represents his attempt to revert back to earlier conceptions, but with an additional philosophical layer that challenged what was usual in artistic work. Hence, art is becoming increasingly philosophical.

Science has also become more philosophical. Physics entered the field of reflexivity when W. Heisenberg discovered his famous uncertainty principle: the physical observer can no longer set himself aside; his measures do influence the physical system he studies; and he is therefore obliged to include himself in the object he is studying. The appearance of cosmology as an accepted discipline represents another major revolution

in scientific-philosophical thought. Studying the universe as a single – and unique – scientific object necessarily implies a reflexive stance: here, the scientist is necessarily included in his very object. Biology also entered the field of reflexivity with Darwin's theory of evolution. Claims for the large-scale evolution of all living forms and species compel us to seeing ourselves as products of that evolutionary process. Moreover, the human sciences have considerably expanded and the issue of reflexivity is quite central to all of them: if these sciences drop reflexivity, they lose their human character. Retaining it, however, places it at the core of their reflection. This means that they will have to develop another considerably different method than those already used by the natural sciences.

Thus, 20th-century philosophy represented an expanding universe and, in my opinion, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is currently everywhere. Religious thinkers had understood the need to open itself to philosophy many centuries ago, but now art, as well as science, have had the same realization, with the resulting intellectual landscape undergoing significant change.

VII. TIME AND FREEDOM IN JUDGING

Our colloquium has focused on two peculiar questions concerning time and freedom. I would like bring to light some existing links between both reflexivity and time and reflexivity and freedom.

Time seems to be at once both the enemy and friend of reflexivity. On the one hand, it makes reflexivity impossible (the mind never being able to grasp itself because of time) and, on the other, it turns out to be the condition of possibility for every form of reflexivity. We are faced with a real difficulty here.

According to Thomas Aquinas, all forms of human reflexivity are only possible with time; there is always a delay between the self as object and as knower; hence no real reflexivity can take place. Yet, there is one sole exception: judgement. Through judgement, the mind, while grasping a determinate object (the judgement's subject), grasps itself at the same time, and thus gains access to actual and true reflexivity².

In any judgement of the form S is P, the mind considers S and P as two distinct representations and declares that they are two distinct

2. F.-X. PUTTALLAZ, *Le sens de la réflexion chez Thomas d'Aquin* (Études de Philosophie Médiévale, 66), Paris, Vrin, 1991. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Veritate* I, 9; *Summa Theologiae* Ia q.16 a. 2.

representations of one and the same object; asserting itself as the origin of the duplication of perspectives, it gives its real unity and identity back to the object and thereby knows itself as doing so. Thus, reflexivity is achieved.

This point has been highlighted by John Austin, a contemporary philosopher, in his well-known theory of speech acts³. He has shown that in every assertion, one can presuppose a pragmatic operator, who is mostly implicit, but who commonly expresses the speaker's involvement. The judgement "The sky is blue" can be analysed by using this form: "(I believe, I claim, I say that) The sky is blue". The implicit (but actual) presence of the pragmatic operator is the sign that the mind is seizing itself. It is quite similar to Thomas Aquinas' conception of judgement, but is considered from a very different perspective.

The fact that the human mind does have the ability to reflect implies that it actually belongs to the sphere of intellects⁴: all true intellects are capable of a perfect return on themselves, as argued by the famous *Liber de Causis*⁵ and Proclus's *Elements of Theology*⁶. While pure intellects, like God or the angels, are immediately reflexive, the human intellect must first turn to material objects in order to get actualized. Insofar as it opens itself to otherness through the material objects it meets, it is able to return on itself. Therefore, the human being, as an incarnate intellect, has quite a particular status: as a body among others, it is linked to all other bodies and is open to their influences; as an intellect, it is able to withdraw itself from "sensible stuff" and grasp itself as a thinking being. These two essential human features are to be thought of as articulated to one another: immanence and transcendence, with respect to "material stuff", are both sides of a unique human relationship to the world that can be called existential location: a being-within-the-world, as certain existentialists have described it.

Thomas Aquinas spoke of the human soul as a horizon⁷ between spirit and matter, or, in other words, between time and eternity. The horizon is

3. J.L. AUSTIN, *How to Do Things with Words* (The William James Lectures, 1), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1975.

4. See on this topic K. RAHNER, *Spirit in the World*, London – Oxford – New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 1994.

5. *Le liber de Causis: Edition établie à l'aide de 90 manuscrits avec introduction et notes* par A. PATTIN, in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 28 (1966) 90-203. Cf. prop.12: *Omnis intelligentia intelligit essentiam suam* and 14: *Omnis sciens qui scit essentiam suam est rediens ad essentiam suam reditione completa*, pp. 74-79.

6. PROCLUS, *The Elements of Theology*. A revised text by E.R. DODDS, Oxford, Clarendon, 1963. See prop. 15: All that is capable of reverting upon itself is incorporeal.

7. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra Gentiles* II, 68.

a line which simultaneously divides and unites two different fields, like the earth and heaven; as regards the horizon of the soul, it implies the human soul as a kind of *copula mundi* (copula of the world) i.e. a connection making the world one and unique, despite its multiple parts and levels of being.

The fact that man is capable of reflexivity has some striking consequences. According to Aquinas, for example, it implies that the brain is not the organ of thought. As a matter of fact, thought can have no organ, or else that material organ would hinder the perfect return of the mind on itself, a return which truly exists. This thesis seems quite provocative when considered from a modern neurophysiological perspective: currently, thinking requires material support and the idea of a thought separate from any material subject sounds a bit weird, making one question what it might actually mean. An interesting idea would be this: the brain is not the organ of thought because thought is able to shape its own brain to some extent, therefore exceeding the status of any simple organ. Thus, the brain would not be an organ *stricto sensu*, but would nevertheless be a material support for thinking.

A last point concerning freedom: there are a lot of conceptions of freedom, but only one of them is particularly significant in the present context: freedom as the ability to wrench oneself free from the world and gain access to one's own inner good. Freedom, as understood in this manner, is a condition of possibility for every judgement, which, as a matter of fact, requires both immersion in the world and transcendence with respect to it. Thus, freedom, judgement, time, reflexivity, philosophy, science, and theology have made up a set of meaningful concepts in which each term takes on an identity and sense. The present configuration is different from past versions, but what really matters is that all the elements remain linked together, while keeping a singular meaningful identity.

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