



REVIEW

Nature as Guide: Wittgenstein and the Renewal of Moral Theology by David Goodill, OP, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C., 2022, pp. xiii+319, £62.89, hbk

The aim of this book is to show that Wittgenstein's philosophy of language can help to renew Catholic moral theology by enabling us to overcome the dichotomy of nature and reason that, through the influence of Kant still underlies much moral theology. Starting from Elizabeth Anscombe's article 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism' Goodill, although critical of Wittgenstein's hostility to metaphysics, seeks to resituate him in the metaphysical tradition of Plato and Aristotle and to rediscover the metaphysical assumptions of ethics in Aristotle and Aquinas.

To do this, Goodill first patiently and subtly unfolds for us in chapters 1–4 the path of Wittgenstein's thought about language and its use from the *Tractatus* to his late and more dialectical philosophy, devoting on the way careful attention to the still rather uncharted land of Wittgenstein's middle years, using the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Mathematics* and *Philosophical Remarks* more than the usual *Blue and Brown Books*, although Goodill includes much about following a rule. The first half of the book provides a comprehensive and very readable account of Wittgenstein's overall philosophy that sees a continuity in his interests and aims. These are summed up for us by Goodill as a gradual transition from looking for a general form of propositions and focussing on the logical structure of language in the *Tractatus* to seeking the basis of conceptual thought in prelinguistic practices in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Goodill's discussion of some readings of Wittgenstein, for example, of William Charlton and Rush Rees in chapter 3, are both detailed and very fair. The author sees Wittgenstein as treading the knife-edge of realism between idealism and empiricism without falling into the one-sidedness of either side and thus holding nature and reason together. This realism is explained by Wittgenstein's turn to everyday practice and natural reactions as the source of our concepts, in his attempt to cure us of the 'illness' of seeking the underlying reasons for everything. Any reader may learn a great deal about Wittgenstein's thought from the first half of this book.

In its second half, Goodill goes on to discuss ways in which the lessons of Wittgenstein's philosophy can be applied to moral theology for its renewal and so provide for an encounter with the wisdom of theology. It turns out, however, that Goodill largely sees the renewal of moral theology to lie in Servais Pinckaers OP's book, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, apart from some discussion of Jean Porter's *Nature as Reason* (but not her *The Rediscovery of Virtue*), three momentary mentions of Nick Austin SJ and one of Oliver O'Donovan. Goodill bases his account of the relevance of Wittgenstein for moral theology, in chapter 7, on the threefold structure of the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa*, of action, habits and the external principles of law and grace. In the discussion of the role of the will in action, for example, the author sees an agreement between Wittgenstein's view that action is the willing and Aquinas's view that the will guides

all the powers of the soul in human beings. Although Goodill is expressly aware of the limitations of Wittgenstein's philosophy, it is in the second half of the book that the questions begin to arise. Three of them may be mentioned here.

First of all, Wittgenstein, in discouraging us from looking for reasons and in founding language on preconceptual practices, might seem to be rather anti-reason. This is very different from Aquinas, who describes the natural law that every human being can recognise as 'the rational creature's participation in the eternal law'. We are moral agents precisely because we have reason. It is because we can recognise what is right and wrong by reason that human beings of whatever religious belief can agree about practice. The lessons of Wittgenstein may well be more applicable to the *Prima Secundae* about principles of action than to the *Secunda Secundae* about the individual virtues. Wittgenstein has little to say about specific virtues, yet Goodill remarks that we are made good by the virtues. Goodill rightly directs us to the importance of Wittgenstein for understanding intentionality, which is a significant theme in Aquinas. But the discussion about our likeness with animals does not seem to make moral theology clearer and seems too close to Hume, who thought that they are like us because they exhibit reason in matching means with ends (*A Treatise of Human Nature* I iii 16). It is only with considerable qualification that we can talk about animals sharing emotions with us, basically desire, fear and anger, because it is *typical* of human beings, being rational by nature, to restrain and control negative emotions in their fallen state. Reason gives us *dominion* over our actions, which also makes us be in the image of God.

Secondly, Goodill observes that Wittgenstein directs us to our origin and destiny. Our origin, however, is not wholly natural because reason sets us above nature. One only has to ask oneself, Does the rational arise from the irrational? in order to see this. This is where it is right to go deeper and seek further for an explanation of our rational nature, but Wittgenstein precludes us from doing this because he has no concept of a substantial soul that is directly created by God and is immortal. Without this Wittgenstein is unable to direct us to our proper end of beatitude, but there is no point in being moral except for its end, reward in a life beyond this one, because justice is plainly not achieved in this life. The prologue to the *Secunda Pars* specially reminds us that we are made in the image of God; this is the starting point of Aquinas's moral theology.

As a third point, Goodill introduces the question of how far Wittgenstein is open to transcendence, and instances the exchange of views between Cornelius Ernst OP and Fergus Kerr OP on this point. Significantly, Goodill remarks that Aquinas overcomes the dichotomy between reason and nature, the very thing which Wittgenstein is supposed to help us overcome, by deriving the origin of both from the same source, God (who is higher than nature). In spite of these criticisms, which I hope have been fairly raised, *Nature as Guide* is in many respects a model book, beautifully written, always clear, sympathetic and wide ranging.

One way that Wittgenstein undoubtedly contributes to moral theology is, as Goodill notes, that by exposing the dependency of human beings on community he directs attention to our *vulnerability*, a point that is lacking in Aristotle's approach to ethics, which seems more to be written for the prosperous (*eudaimōn*) than for the weak and oppressed. Nonetheless, I cannot help thinking that an equally profitable source for the renewal of moral theology would, for example, be the study of St Ambrose of Milan, whose *De Officiis* is modelled on Cicero's book with same title, making it also

an encounter of philosophy with divine wisdom. Ambrose for example, says that the life of virtue is a life in accordance with nature (*De Officiis* III iv 24), and that whoever injures another violates nature, which is not so for animals (a bird does not violate nature by killing its prey). Ambrose observes that it is *mercy* which especially makes us human; this rather distinguishes us from animals.

Wittgenstein can only tell us about human life, but Aquinas tells us about divine life, our dependency on grace and the hope of the new life of grace. Goodill quotes Josef Pieper as saying that hope gives human beings their freedom. In the last 15 pages, Goodill reunites us with one of the distinctive features of Aquinas's moral theology, his questions on the gifts of the Holy Spirit and of the beatitudes in the life of grace, taking as his examples the connection of prudence (a natural virtue) with the gift of counsel and of hope (a supernatural virtue) with the gift of fear. These pages are quite beautiful and seem to ask for a sequel by the author that expands on this attractive theme of Aquinas's moral theology with its sources.

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