

INTELLECTUALISM AND ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

By SIMON TUGWELL

ONE OF Screwtape's more obliging 'patients', after a narrow escape from conversion to belief in God, came, we are told, to be fond of talking about 'that inarticulate sense for actuality which is our ultimate safeguard against the aberrations of mere logic'. This kind of ploy has been used over and over again in all kinds of contexts. It can obviously be used, as it is by Screwtape's patient, against the intellectual claims made by religion; but it can equally well be used by religious people against the arguments of unbelievers. And it can be used, within religion, to support a preference for direct religious experience, as contrasted with doctrine and dogmatic systems. 'Words, words, words', people sometimes exclaim, like Hamlet, when they are wearied with the subtleties of thought and argument. When our philosophies fail to soothe the ache in our hearts, we look for some other kind of 'meaning' for our lives; when we find ourselves trapped by some seemingly unanswerable argument, we fall back on saying, 'Well, I just know that isn't true'.

This kind of thing is part of the stuff of human life, and as such is inevitably part of the stuff of human religion. But at certain periods in human history, it seems that the rejection or renunciation of rational argument and intellectual world-views becomes more acute and more widespread. It is commonly suggested that our own time is one such period. Words, which proliferate now to an extent unheard of before, have lost their power to enlighten and compel us, and we are unusually aware of the inadequacy of language as a means of communication. And, since we cannot escape from words, we seem to be moving into an era where people prefer words of revelation or authority to words of suggestion and argument; gurus and oracles are held in higher esteem than thinkers.

The lines thus seem to be drawn between an anti-intellectual, anti-rationalist generation, and the surviving believers in the value of rational argument and intellectual perception.

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But I wonder whether the simple contrast between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, rationalism and anti-rationalism, is really quite as illuminating and honest as it might appear to be at first sight.

Let us go back to the supposed beginnings of philosophical rationalism at the dawn of greek culture, which is still, albeit failingly, our own culture. The official doxography, from Aristotle to our own day, supposes that the crucial change occurs with the abandonment of the more 'mythical' mode of thought of people like Hesiod, the greek poet (*fl. c. 735 B.C.*), in favour of the more rational, argumentative mode of thought of the pre-Socratics. Thus, in one of the standard textbooks, that by Kirk and Raven, we read that 'It was in Ionia that the first completely rationalistic attempts to describe the nature of the world took place'.

But is the official doxography correct? It all depends on what we mean by 'rational' or 'rationalistic', certainly. But surely there is a sense in which Aristotle was simply wrong to see Anaximander and the rest of them as more particularly his predecessors than Hesiod, just as it is wrong to see the ionian physicists as ancestors of modern scientists (a belief ruthlessly refuted by Popper).

After all, in many ways Hesiod is far more of a rationalist than most of the pre-Socratics. He tells us that in his view the best man of all is one who can work things out for himself, though a good learner is also to be commended (a view which Zeno, the founder of the Stoics, evidently found unpalatable, so he reversed the order). And Hesiod duly sets out to make his own organization of the various kinds of knowledge and information he has, wherever he got it from. There are some things he reckons we cannot know much about, like the will of Zeus, instanced chiefly in the unpredictability of the weather; but this limit to our knowledge does not bother him very much. When he is sceptical about some traditional doctrine, he tells us so; he is not prepared to believe, for instance, that Zeus can be tricked, whatever the stories might say. Although much of the material he has to organize is 'mythical', in the sense that it concerns stories about gods and suchlike, the way he arranges it is eminently rational, and in this sense it is all of a piece with his down to earth observations about life, and his sensible advice about wearing a felt hat when the weather is bad, and his warnings about boats. Aristotle was perhaps misled into believing that Hesiod was a mythographer *rather than* a philosopher, because he was not interested in the kind of philosophical questions that Aristotle was interested

in. He has no cosmogony, for instance. As M. L. West has said, his very bald statement about the genesis of the world is not an explanation of it at all, 'not even a silly explanation'. He simply takes the world as given.

It is, paradoxically, with the people whom Aristotle regarded as the first real philosophers that we meet a serious loss of nerve about human reason. It is with them that unheard of mythical entities like 'Time' and 'The Unbounded' first appear on the scene; and, presumably to support this assault on common sense, at least some of the philosophers seem to go out of their way to give themselves an aura of mystery, if not of mysticism. Empedocles was, of course, famously a man who presented himself as a religious figure; but, if we may trust Diodorus, he was in this imitating Anaximander. Parmenides claims the authority of revelation for his revolutionary upsetting of all our normal concepts, and Heraclitus seems to be making a comparison between himself and the Delphic Oracle. And it is surely no accident that the period of the pre-Socratics should coincide with the spread of mystery religions with their soothing rites and revelations. When people find themselves confronted with more data than they can handle with their inherited rational equipment, they turn to myths, whether those of the Orphics or those of the ionian physicists. Mathematics may not always, as the housekeeper in Ionesco's play, *La Leçon*, fears, lead to murder, but it certainly thrives in the company of mysticism and occultism.

We may well want to agree with Aristotle that people like Heraclitus and Parmenides are far more significant philosophers than Hesiod; but it is not because they are more rational. It is because they are prepared, perhaps under duress, to ask unreasonable questions, questions not foreseen by the inherited canons of common sense. Before their views can be absorbed into a new kind of cultural respectability they must first stand out as arrant nonsense. What Parmenides says, for instance, is patently nonsensical, yet most western philosophy ever after is one way or another dependent on it.

Where Hesiod was basically empiricist and rational, the pre-Socratics, in their different ways, all launch off into what J. L. Austin, I think, called the 'madness of metaphysics'. They start, not with what is given, but with fantastic visionary postulates; and the result, as likely as not, is that they have to contradict almost all our everyday perceptions of reality. And even when this violent upheaval has settled down a bit, it leaves us with paradoxes and

puzzles. Heraclitus comes back to what is given, but uses it to prove the contradictoriness of everything. Plato comes back to what is given, but only on condition that it be recognized as less than real. Aristotle comes back to it, but the price he pays is a radical separation between our sub-lunar world and the higher realities, such as God. If such philosophies convince us that they have something of truth in them, they force us to recognize that the truth of our world is a riddling and elusive truth.

If such philosophies are great, it is, paradoxically, because they make less satisfying sense of things; to pursue them requires a continual wrenching of our minds away from the most obvious answers, to face up to the questions that really have no answers. They are thus constantly exposed to the temptation of trivializing them back within the bounds of ordinary manageability. The battle is not, simply, between rationalism and anti-rationalism, or between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, but rather between a safe rationalism of common sense and platitude, on the one side, and an adventurous intellectual agnosticism on the other.

These things are, I suspect, a parable for us. It is surely not fair to the apparently anti-rational christian theologians, like Tertullian, simply to see them as rejecting rational thought and intellectual achievement. When Tertullian vaunts the absurdity of christian belief, it is a highly intellectual protest against a pagan theology which made too much sense. The respectable gods of the greek philosophers could not really satisfy the needs of men, perhaps not even their intellectual needs. Gods so shy of incarnation or passion are trapped within a doctrine of transcendence which is quite coherent and proper, but which somehow fails to fit the facts. If it is a nonsense to say that God has a Son, and that that Son became man and died, then it is a nonsense which liberates us, which liberates even the mind, for a new and even more daring intellectual adventure. It is we, in our timidity, who have presumed to set limits to what transcendence might mean. And the old, savage gods live on in the twilight precisely because we cannot worship or be saved by the hygienic gods of the philosophers. And in Christ they are curiously vindicated. Christ poses a challenge to pagan proprieties, but it is, amongst other things, a philosophical challenge; and there is no doubt that Tertullian saw himself as responding to it as a philosopher. After all, he sported the philosophers' dress, and in some of his works displays immense philosophical erudition and competence (see, for instance, the massive commentary on his *De Anima* by Waszink).

The essential problem is well brought out by Plato in his *Phaedo*. Socrates there shows that *misologia*, like misanthropy, arises because of premature trust. When we find that our trust has been misplaced, we are tempted to turn against all men, all *logoi*. Instead, we must try to be patient and courageous, following each *logos* carefully as it beckons to us, following it even to the point of improbability, finding often that the results are negative or seemingly trifling, but resisting the temptation to settle down prematurely to any conviction. And the premature conviction and the disillusioned reaction against rational thought are only two sides of the same coin: they are both, in fact, a refusal of the intellectual task.

Origen, evidently, was well aware of this. His method, as reported by Gregory Thaumaturgus (or whoever composed the *Farewell Discourse* to Origen), was to take his students through all the poets and philosophers, so that they would realize how arbitrary they are in their premisses, whatever internal consistency they may achieve thereafter. Like the sceptics before him, and indeed using their method, Origen is concerned to show how irrational the foundations may be for highly rational systems of thought. And, in Origen's view, this is not merely a philosophical blunder, it is one of the more serious kinds of idolatry.

This highlights one element in the kind of rationality which in due course provokes a reaction of anti-rationalism: a philosophical system can come to be too exclusively concerned with its own methodology and its own coherency. Something like this is presumably involved in the curious way in which Roger Bacon dismisses St Albert and St Thomas as intellectual upstarts, who have no business to be teaching. In his view, they have not been properly trained; therefore, they cannot be taken seriously. It is amusing and instructive to find the great fathers of scholasticism, often dismissed because of their excessive rationalism, here being regarded as insufficiently disciplined in their minds.

It is, as we have been warned often enough, possible for us to go on talking long after we have stopped meaning anything. C. S. Lewis, for instance, in his brilliant essay *Bluspels and Flalansferes*, shows how we can come to be betwitched by forms of intellectual shorthand into generating 'sense' from a metaphor whose original limitations we have forgotten. The resulting 'rationality' is amusingly caricatured by Ionesco in the scene in *La Cantatrice Chauve*, where Mr and Mrs Martin prove, laboriously, that they must be husband and wife, only to have the maid refute the whole argument.

Now surely there is a legitimate protest to be made against some kinds of theology which have effectively been reduced to intellectual games going on in a vacuum, full of answers but no longer aware of any questions, utterly consistent, but yet quite meaningless.

But the protest must be an intellectual one if it is to be effective. Two instances spring to mind from the history of christian spirituality, one of which I shall use simply as an Aunt Sally, the other of which I shall discuss more fully.

The first comes from Thomas à Kempis. Near the beginning of *The Imitation of Christ* he declares: 'I would rather feel compunction than know its definition'. This is obviously only one text out of many which could be quoted, protesting against the substitution of theoretical cleverness for real conversion of life. And it is an important protest. But yet the way in which it is made is, on the face of it, stupid. After all, how can I know whether I am feeling compunction or not unless I know what it is? It is doubtful whether I could even feel it at all without having some idea of what it is. After all, compunction is not just a 'raw emotion': it is an emotion understood in a particular way. Clearly Thomas à Kempis is in fact presupposing that we all know what compunction is; he assumes the theoretical knowledge, and so can concentrate on the practicalities. But, since the word 'compunction' belongs within a whole context of related concepts and theories, his dictum in fact requires the acceptance of a whole view of what the christian life is all about. But, since all he wants us to do is put it all into practice, he is effectively telling us not to question this view of the christian life. He is assuming that the answers have already been found. His anti-intellectualism, therefore, turns out to be in fact the unquestioning acceptance of a particular kind of understanding. It is, therefore, curiously similar to rationalistic refusals of difficult questions. There seems to be a nucleus of rationalism at the heart of the anti-intellectualism.

My second example is the teaching of de Caussade. He too famously inveighs against trying to live by reason, and preaches a doctrine of total abandonment of oneself to God, surrendering all attempts to understand for ourselves what is going on. But yet, on closer examination, his own doctrine is not nearly as anti-intellectual as it appears to be. When he complains about people's 'dreadful ideas of perfection', or accuses people of seeking their 'idea of God' instead of God himself, he is protesting against the rather mechanistic and constricting schemes of piety currently in

vogue. But what he offers instead is, as he says in at least one passage in his letters, a different way of 'envisaging' life. He is, in fact, proposing an alternative vision, an alternative way of understanding things. Against the calculating, rather self-centred vision of life implicit particularly in the Jansenism he had to combat in the Visitation nuns for whom he wrote most of his surviving works, he proposes a God-centred, self-forgetting spirituality, which requires totally different images from those which were generally current. Just as St Thérèse repudiated the imagery of climbing Mount Carmel, so he rejected the imagery of progressing along a way. He considered it futile, if not dangerous, to be concerned with progress, and he comforts people who feel that they have lost their way by suggesting that there is no way to lose. Instead he wants to highlight the importance of vicissitudes; so he suggests, if I read him aright, that we should see our lives much more as a kind of fairy story, in which all kinds of monsters and mysterious terrors confront us, only to make the story more interesting. The hero somehow always comes out all right in the end. De Caussade is not offering us any particular practices, he is not telling us to expect any particular experiences or patterns of experience; he is offering us a way of envisaging whatever turns up.

Where Thomas à Kempis seems content that all the theoretical questions have been answered, and so raises no intellectual questions, de Caussade seems to be convinced that the questions have been answered all too well, and so sees it as his task to reopen some of them. And, whether he likes it or not, this is an intellectual task. Not, of course, intellectual in the sense that it requires the following of prescribed intellectual procedures: it means reopening of the mind.

A more general view of all this can, perhaps, be suggested by some rather generalizing comments on church history. At the beginning, inevitably, the Church had only a hazy idea of what she was and what her members ought to be doing and thinking. Therefore, study was regarded as essential. Hermas, who was certainly not a philosopher in any technical sense, maintains that without study there is no prospect of faith being retained. Barnabas seems to be of the same opinion. And it is more than likely that the early Church retained from Judaism the sense of the supreme importance of getting together to study the word of God. How can we do God's will if we do not know what it is? And if we do not study, shall we not be in grave danger of being beguiled by some false interpretation

of God's will? In Barnabas's view, this is the danger of Judaism. And it must have been a real danger. It was, after all, not normal to be a Christian; to maintain one's faith would require a certain courage in being eccentric. An attitude of mental *laissez-faire* would almost certainly mean that people would drift back into Judaism or paganism of some kind, whether or not it went on masquerading as Christianity.

But, of course, all that changed as Christianity became more normal. It was only this development which made it possible for the Church to begin to present herself in conformist terms, and which made it possible, therefore, for an attitude of seeking to come to be regarded as probably heretical. Cassian's view of discernment as meaning, essentially, following the *instituta patrum*, like Vincent of Lérins' famous (and useless) criterion of catholic belief, would have been quite unthinkable to an earlier age.

It was natural enough that the Church should develop this sense of unadventurous orthodoxy. It had the advantage of protecting people from all kinds of silliness, and enabled the Christians to present a more or less united front to the world.

But plainly it could not work. Over and over again the Church has had to reopen the questions she had thought were closed. The system of monastic orthopraxy was rudely challenged in the thirteenth century, for instance, by the friars. St Francis specifically repudiated the decency of monastic rules for his followers, on the grounds that the Lord wanted him to be 'a new kind of idiot'. Here is the nonsense protesting against a sense which has come to make too much sense to be viable in the nonsense of this world. And the franciscan nonsense proved itself capable of generating an enormous amount of new sense.

Similarly with doctrinal orthodoxy. The Church has several times had to recognize that the very security of her doctrinal system has let people effectively lose their faith, and only a radical rethinking, such as that undertaken by St Thomas, could reaffirm the traditional belief. If the Church, with her essential doctrines, presents a constant challenge to the orthodoxies of the world, she must allow the world's questions also to challenge any tendency there may be in herself to let her orthodoxy shrivel up into a mere ideology.

It seems, then, that there is a complex relationship between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, rationalism and anti-rationalism. The evasion of intellectual questions may be expressed either in a rigidified rationalism or in the form of a refusal to bother

with intellectual matters at all; and the maintaining of a lively intellectual, rational life needs to be invigorated by periodic injections of what appear to be, by the prevailing standards, nonsensical speculations.

We must be prepared to allow whatever modern anti-intellectualism there may be to challenge the Church as to whether her understanding of herself and her rational methodologies have not somehow become uprooted from any genuine exercise of the mind, grappling with the God-given realities of his word and his world. And this will quite certainly mean rediscovering a proper sense of christian agnosticism, both in the doctrinal sphere, with a recovery of negative theology, and in the sphere of ethics and spirituality, with a recovery of the sense that God leads each individual in a unique and usually odd way.

But at the same time we must be prepared to point out to anti-intellectualism that its protest can only be made effectively by hard and disciplined intellectual effort, and that if it will not undertake this effort, it will itself turn out, eventually, to be nothing but a veiled form of rationalism.

The reader's attention is drawn to the following works:

Hesiod, ed. and trans. H. G. Evelyn-White (Loeb Classical Library, 1936).

C. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1960).

M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford, 1971).

Tertullian, *Treatise on the Incarnation*, ed. and trans. E. Evans (London, 1956).

Scripta Leonis (early Franciscan Stories), ed. and trans. R. Brooke (Oxford, 1970).

C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge, 1969).

Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. H. Chadwick (new ed., Cambridge, 1980).