

Study day “How to think about being” – 20 April 2016

Graduate Contributions

Pui Him Ip: How to Think About Being – A Patristic Perspective

In this paper, I will put forward a perspective on the question regarding God and being in patristic thought. My approach is that the question of ‘being’ in patristic thought should not be merely treated as about the application of ‘being-language’ to God in the Church fathers, e.g. did the fathers think God is ‘identical with being’, ‘being itself’ or ‘above being’. Rather, I seek to show that there is a deeper question about the way a specific philosophical problematic originated in the Platonic tradition was integrated into Christian reflections by the Church Fathers, and why they did so. I will sketch out in two steps what I call the ‘patristic problematic of God and being’. The first step sketches the philosophical background of this problematic. This will be largely achieved through looking at key texts from Plato, the Timaeus and the Parmenides, and how key parts of these texts provided the basic set up for the patristic problematic. The second step of the patristic problematic involves a brief examination of patristic interpretation of Exodus 3:14. This is an important step because it shows us one key way the philosophical problematic entered into patristic thought, namely, through the activity of scriptural interpretation. Combining these two steps, we will obtain a general picture of what the patristic problematic is. I should conclude by some methodological remarks on how we might approach understanding the patristic problematic.

Hugh Burling: How to Think About Being – an Analytic Perspective

In modern theology, claims about the nature and existence of God are often criticised for committing the error of something called “onto-theology”. But it is difficult to give a definition of what onto-theology might be which is clear and precise enough for theologians to defend themselves against. I offer three possibilities for what the onto-theological mistake might consist in. Suppose that, vaguely put, ‘onto-theology’ is affirming God’s ‘existence’ and talking about God using metaphysical categories which apply to creatures. The first criticism says that doing so means we must (1) use a ‘thick’ notion of “existence” (“being”, etc.) to fill in our concept of God qua “most real Thing” - and then (2) use that concept of God to fill in our notion of “existence” (etc.), thus introducing vicious circularity into our metaphysics of theism. I argue that this first criticism, which I call the “Trivial Problem of onto-theology”, is so easy to avoid that it is trivial, and can’t be what the onto-theology critic is really worried about. All we have to do is avoid (1) by meaning nothing, when we use “existence”-terms, except positive quantification; and/or, avoid (2) by not using our doctrine of God to do ontology. The second possibility, or the “Easy Problem of onto-theology”, is that ‘onto-theology’ will lead us to make God subordinate to other aspects of reality which might ground modal facts - such as abstract objects or possible worlds. We can head this off by developing a metaphysics of modality which ensures God is more explanatorily fundamental than anything else there is or could be; and such projects can be carried out perfectly well with any decent metaphysical apparatus. Then I move on to the “hard problem of ontotheology”. What if (1) is unavoidable because “existence” (etc.) can’t be shorn of thick connotations? In other words, what if the Trivial Problem ceases to be trivial because we cannot make “exists”, “is” or “there is” sufficiently trivial? Even if “F exists” putatively says nothing about F because all it does is number how many Fs there are, “F exists” must still have truth conditions or, more precisely in this context, truth-makers, which suggests that quantification always has implicit content. I offer some non-realist accounts of truth which can’t solve the hard problem because they’re implausible for extra-theological reasons; then I offer some realist accounts - truthmaker maximalism and a ‘because’ account - which, if plausible, allow us to say “God exists” without accidentally saying something extra, creaturely even, about God.

Nathan Lyons: How to Think About Being – A Postmodern Perspective

This paper compares the way that French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion and English theologian John Milbank construe theological ontology in the wake of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology. The key question here concerns the kind of being possessed by God: what sort of existence could be enjoyed by that which gives existence to everything else?

Milbank and Marion’s respective answers begin from a shared commitment to the ‘French genealogy’ of modernity, which, inspired by Etienne Gilson, retimes Heidegger’s genealogy such that ontotheology proper arrives not with Socrates and Aristotle but instead with Scotist univocity in the late medieval period. From this shared ‘postmodern’ beginning Marion and Milbank proceed to two seemingly opposed conclusions: one God ‘without being’, one God ‘with being’. Marion’s God without being cleaves to the Platonic ‘beyond being’ tradition (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), whereas Milbank’s God with being cleaves to the Latin ‘being itself’ tradition (ipsum esse)—though both also claim aspects of the alternative tradition as confirming their own view.

I argue that the decisive issue between these two approaches to theological ontology is differing conceptions of the way Christian theology should respond to philosophical ontology, and particularly in this case to the ontology of Martin Heidegger. I suggest that, despite the fecundity of Marion’s approach, he fails to sufficiently appreciate the capacity of Christian theology to address the question of being according to its own peculiar lights (eg. the doctrines of Trinity, creation ex nihilo, Incarnation). Milbank’s approach is therefore preferable. Heidegger’s ontology should be met not with a theological appendix (Marion), but with a theological rival (Milbank).

I conclude by suggesting how the debate between Marion and Milbank can illuminate theological ontology as it is treated in other contexts, such as discussions about the nature of God’s existence in analytic philosophy of religion.

Stefan Baumann: How to Think About Being – A Phenomenological Perspective

Abstract to be given