

ON THE MISTAKE OF THINKING REASON'S PRODUCTS TRANSPARENT TO ITS GAZE: DENYS TURNER ON ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

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Denys Turner

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Denys Turner's latest book is a subtle and distinguished contribution to the enormous literature on faith and reason. It's a book written with clarity and wit, and it also shows a substantial knowledge of contemporary and medieval discussions of the place of argument in knowing God. It is, however, a difficult book. The topics it treats are abstract; they are also controversial among both philosophers and theologians, and, as is the habit of theologians, Turner expends many words upon exegesis of his authorities (principally Thomas Aquinas) and his enemies (principally John Milbank), and although his exegetical efforts yield much, they also sometimes obscure or derail the main lines of his argument. In what follows I'll make as little comment as I can on these controverted exegetical questions and shall focus instead on the structure of the argument. This is not to say that I think it unimportant to consider what Aquinas or Scotus or Milbank think about the matters discussed in Turner's book. But it is to say that there is virtue—virtue that Turner should acknowledge given his own emphasis on what reason can do—in considering the position argued in this book largely in terms of its conceptual structure.

Turner's book is interesting not only in the substance of what he claims, but also in its fascinating and unusual combination of profoundly right-headed theology with unusually wrong-headed philosophy. That is, Turner analyzes and depicts God rightly, while at the same time being

wrong in important elements of his analysis of argument. Error in the one usually leads to error in the other, but not in Turner's case. And since this is so, the tight connection he takes to hold between his understanding of God and his understanding of reason's capacities and acts must in fact be looser than he thinks. I'll try to show that and why it is so in what follows.

Turner's central thesis can be stated briefly, though it is far from simple: *It is a matter of faith for Christians that God's existence is rationally demonstrable.* Around the exegesis and defense of this claim Turner weaves a tight and conceptually fascinating fabric. He presents the claim as one taught by the Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith promulgated at the First Vatican Council in April 1870, and he is right about that: Much of his language in formulating it is taken directly from that document. His interpretation of the claim is, however, neither given nor contradicted in that document, and that is not at all surprising, for every constituent of the claim requires much analysis in order to be made clear, and any particular interpretation of any one of its constituents is unavoidably controversial. To specify what you mean by, for example, "rationally demonstrable" is immediately to make enemies of those many philosophers and theologians who have some other idea about what it is to demonstrate or what part reason plays in demonstration. It is no <QUI:>part of the work of the Catholic magisterium to pronounce on such matters, and so Turner's defense of the claim is not exactly exegesis of what the council taught but rather an argument prompted by that teaching.

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this be
"not"?>

Let's consider first what Turner means by "rationally demonstrable." This, for him, is equivalent to "provable," and he understands a proof on the Aristotelian deductive model to be an argument whose premises are true and whose conclusion is entailed by its premises. *Modus ponens* (if p then q; p; therefore q) is an ideal type of proof in this sense. But when a particular proof has "God exists" or something like it as a conclusion, more needs to be said about the relations between the terms in the premises and those in the conclusion, and Turner specifies further conditions which arguments of that kind must meet: "[F]irst, that no equivocation occurs in the premises; secondly, that the conclusion contain terms which are *not* univocally the same as those contained in the premises, for otherwise the argument could not be said to conclude to God; nor, alternatively, may terms in the conclusion be equivocally related to the premises, for then the inference could not be logically valid" (210). The key point here is that the argument's conclusion ("God exists," let's say) must contain a predicate or predicates used neither univocally (i.e., with exactly the same meaning) nor equivocally (i.e., with quite different meaning) with respect to the same predicate or predicates in the premises.

Turner applies this constraint not to all proofs of the existence of God but only to a proof that moves from "the degrees of created goodness which we perceive and concludes to the existence of the supreme good

which is their creating cause" (197). These are arguments now often called cosmological because they move from some facts about (or the bare fact of) the cosmos to the existence of God. Turner, following Aquinas, dismisses so-called ontological arguments, arguments from the idea of a highest perfection to its actuality, and so his comments on rational demonstration have nothing to do with arguments of that kind. Turner (and Aquinas) are, I think, wrong in this dismissal, and Augustine, Anselm, and Bonaventure right in taking such "ontological" arguments seriously as proofs (though not as persuasive proofs). But that is not the central issue of Turner's book, and so I shall leave it aside.

Why, then, in the case of cosmological arguments, must there be a nonunivocal and nonequivocal relation between the predicates applied to the cosmos in the argument's premises and those applied to God in the argument's conclusion? Because, first, if there were a univocal relation—if, for example, the cosmos were said to exist in just the same way that God does—the argument's conclusion would not be to God because it is definitional of God that he does not exist in just the same way that the cosmos does: He is not just one more being in the world, not an item in the cosmos's furniture, not something whose *essentia* is or may be known. And then, second, if there were an equivocal relation—if the cosmos were said by premise to exist in a way that has nothing at all in common with the way in which God is said by conclusion to exist—the argument would not work as an argument. Aristotelian logic (and common sense) bar validity to an argument whose premised predicates are equivocally related to its concluded predicates.

So far so good. But then, if there is to be a rational demonstration of God's existence from that of the cosmos, there must also be a third (nonunivocal, nonequivocal) relation between the predicates applied to the cosmos and those applied to God. Turner, following Aquinas, calls this third relation "analogical." Such an argument would have to demonstrate (prove) that there is (and perhaps even that there must be) a relation of analogy (and not one of equivocality or univocity) between the predicate "exists" in the claim "the cosmos exists" and the same predicate in the claim "God exists." The conclusion of such an argument would be twofold. First, positively, it would say that "God exists" has meaning given to it by some facts about (or the sheer fact of) the cosmos: It is in virtue of these facts (or this fact) that we know "God exists" to be true; and second, negatively, it would say that "we do not otherwise have any grip on what 'exists' in that case means" (211). The predicate "exists" in such an argument is applied analogically to the cosmos and God because of this combination of positivity and negativity: God exists not as the cosmos does, but the cosmos warrants (indeed, on Turner's view requires) the claim that God exists. Such an argument would presuppose nothing about God because it would begin simply from the cosmos; it would use

nothing other than *ratio*, reason, understood as the faculty of recognizing entailments that connect one claim with another; and it would conclude first that God is, and second that of his existence we understand nothing other than that we may (must) make that claim: "The existence of God is in the nature of a demonstrated unknowability" (256); and, what reason knows of God is "with maximum clarity and precision the *locus* of the divine incomprehensibility" (186). Reason is, on Turner's view, capable of establishing by argument both what it can and what it can't know about God: The ideal-type of the cosmological argument shows, then, both God's existence and reason's incapacity, and in doing so depicts reason as participator in the fabric of natural human existence before God, a fabric woven of affirmation and negation, of the cataphatic affirmation of a necessary apophasis.

Recall that the thesis Turner defends throughout the book is that *it is a matter of faith for Christians that God's existence is rationally demonstrable*. I've now explained what he means by the "rationally demonstrable" part of that claim. It's important to realize that in order for this part of the claim to be successfully defended Turner doesn't need to produce any actual arguments of the kind he describes. He needs only to defend their possibility against attacks, and this he successfully does. There is nothing in-principle impossible about such an argument. It does not make God an item in the world and hence it is not, as some critics would have it, ontological in the sense that it requires a simple univocity of predication between God's existence and that of the cosmos. And neither is it logically impossible or in-principle incoherent. But although Turner does not need to produce tokens of this argument type in order to make good on his defense of this part of his thesis, he does in fact say more about what such arguments are like. And what he says raises problems of a strictly conceptual kind.

The question "why anything?" is, Turner says, one that can be affirmed as meaningful and engaged rationally, or denied as meaningless and therefore refused. It is also a question that forces itself "with the inevitability of the 'natural'" (232) upon the rational mind, and that, if seriously engaged, will yield the answer "because it is created." Turner makes two claims here. The second, which is correct, is that if you allow the question of why there is anything at all—of why there is something rather than nothing—a good, perhaps the best, and certainly the only lively candidate answer <QU2:>is the one he suggests, the one that claims all that is, seen and unseen, to be participatory in and given by something not embraced by the extension of that creedal phrase. But the first, which is not correct, is that those who refuse the question are thereby not rational. Turner says in support of this that the antecedent probability of the question "why anything?" having an answer is greater than the antecedent probability of its not having an answer. The only reason given for such an

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astounding claim is that if a question “lies so obviously in continuity with the sort of intra-mundane causal questions human beings naturally persist in asking about the world” (253–54) then there must be an “overwhelming reason in principle” (253) for rejecting the argument as ill-formed. And there is, he thinks, no such reason.

Now all this, so far as I can tell, is hand-waving rather than argument. Turner depends here on appeal to what is natural (his uneasiness about doing so may be indicated by the use of scare quotes for the word in the first quotation given in the preceding paragraph) and to what is obvious. Such appeals are biographically interesting: Turner here reveals something about what is natural and obvious to him. They may also be statistically interesting: Perhaps (though I’m not sure) most people find the question “why anything?” inevitable and to be obviously in continuity with “intra-mundane causal questions” like “why this tree?” But even if most people are like Turner in recognizing naturalness and inevitability in these claims (I’m not and I don’t), this hardly tells us anything about the antecedent probability he mentions. Biographical and statistical data just aren’t relevant to this, and Turner offers nothing else. Christians, certainly, (and Muslims and Jews) know that the question “why anything?” has an answer and that you are therefore making a mistake if you refuse it as ill-formed. They know, too, that the answer is God’s freely creative act, and some of them may offer arguments like the ones whose possibility Turner defends, though doing so is very much a minority interest. But do they know that the antecedent possibility of “why anything?” having an answer is greater than the antecedent possibility that it has no answer? Certainly they do if the provision of the right answer to a question shows retrospectively that the antecedent probability of its having an answer is maximal. But equally certainly they do not if the question is considered prior to and independently of any such answer—if, that is, the antecedence belongs adverbially to the act of thinking about the question as well as adjectivally to the probability that the question is well-formed such that it may have an answer. The very idea of antecedent probability in such cases is puzzling, and Turner does not elucidate it.

This problem is an instance of a pervasive confusion in Turner’s book. I mean the confusion of an argument’s or a statement’s properties with the knowability of those properties. Or, if you prefer Thomist language, the confusion of an argument or a claim considered *in se* with that same argument or claim considered *quoad nos*. It is one thing to claim that a particular argument or claim has certain properties (formal validity, say, or an antecedent probability of a certain degree) and quite another to claim those properties to be knowable independently—knowable, that is, independently of knowing on other grounds the claim to be true or the argument to be valid. This distinction is elided in Turner’s treatment of the “why anything?” question, as I’ve just suggested, and the elision is marked very

clearly in his use of words like “obvious” to characterize that question’s properties—in this case, the property of being sufficiently like intramundane causal questions to be rationally askable. Turner here makes an epistemic claim, a claim in the order of knowing, which he seems to think derivable from the claim in the order of being about the question’s answerability. That the question is answerable and that, therefore, it is mistaken to deny this on the grounds of the questions ill-formedness is, from a Christian point of view, clear; but that the mistake is obvious or that we are driven to its recognition with the inevitability of the natural is false. There is no interesting general connection between a claim’s or argument’s formal properties and those that relate it to human knowers, and it is a deep and damaging confusion to think that there is. To say that a question is well-formed and to say that it is obviously well-formed is to say two quite different things, just as, to take an example from quite a different place, to say that the truths mentioned in the Declaration of Independence are true is to say something different and less interesting than to say what the Declaration actually says, which is that they are self-evidently so. (What the Declaration actually says is of course false.)

Turner’s confusion on this point may seem trivial and technical, and it is true that it does not call into question his insistence that there can be arguments of the analogical-cosmological sort that interest him: About this he is importantly right against those who would deny it. But the confusion does call into question many among his applications of that point and most especially those that have to do with the place of reasoning in human—and Christian—life; and this in turn raises deep doubts about the reasons he gives for God’s rational demonstrability being a matter of faith, to which I’ll turn at the end of these comments. First, however, to the more important among the difficulties in Turner’s application of the point that it is not logically or theologically impossible that there be analogical-cosmological arguments to the conclusion that God exists. I’ll treat four of these.

Sometimes—just often enough to suggest that he thinks it meaningful to think and talk in this way—Turner uses phrases such as “reason alone” (e.g., 96–97). He does so most often in objecting to what he takes to be the hyper-Augustinian illuminationism of Radical Orthodoxy in general and of John Milbank in particular, according to which (he thinks) reason is excessively subalternated to faith and as a result given no independent powers. It is possible to speak of “reason alone” or “reason by itself” or “pure reason,” of course, but only in the same way that it is possible to speak of “faith alone” or “the digestive system alone.” Faith as act and virtuous habit does not and cannot occur without prior catechesis of the faithful person by language, culture, and so on. The digestive system has as part of its definition reference to things other than itself: to the organism of which it is a part, to food ingested by the organism from without,

and so on. Reason—the discursive, ratiocinative acts by means of which we make claims, construct arguments, recognize entailments, and so forth—also has among the conditions necessary for its activation and among the elements of its definition many things other than itself. Turner recognizes the intimate connection between embodiedness and (human) reason, but he is less clear about the intimacy with which reason's acts are linked to being a language-user (which in turn requires socialization) and to having undergone extensive catechesis in what counts as reasonable. Reasoning is a skill, a *techne*, and like all such has no purity or solitude and can be considered alone, in isolation, only as a *façon de parler*. Reason is never pure, never alone, never by itself; it is always already catechized, formed, instructed, ordered—subaltern, that is, to many things not itself. Among these things may be Christian faith as virtuous habit in response to graceful gift; among them is always faith in the broader Lockean sense of taking some claims to be true upon the credit of their proposer. Abstracting reason from this context of subalternation may have analytical and didactic benefits, but if care is not taken to refer back to ratiocination's inevitable subalternation when speaking of reason's acts (and Turner shows no such care), reason's acts may begin to assume a startling independence: They may begin to be treated as natural to human beings in the same sense as the movement of the lungs or the beating of the heart. And when that happens, as in Turner's prose it sometimes does (and as it also does among some other Thomists), the collapse I've already discussed of the distinction between what an argument is and what it is recognizable as will follow very rapidly. An argument's validity is not there waiting to be recognized in the same way that the air is there waiting to be breathed: The air-breather needs very little by way of catechesis to begin breathing (the most that's usually necessary is a sharp smack on the newborn's rump), but the reasoner needs a great deal by way of catechesis to be able to recognize a valid argument as valid—and this catechesis may go well or badly. Turner's desire to rescue reason from excessive subalternation to faith leads him much too far in the direction of denying reason's inevitable dependence on what it does not give itself.

A second difficulty produced by Turner's tendency to collapse the distinction between validity (a formal fact about an argument) and validity's recognizability (an epistemic fact) is that he tends to overestimate the persuasive capacities of the analogical-cosmological arguments that interest him. Nothing at all follows from the fact of an argument's validity to the persuasiveness of that argument. In the case of arguments about difficult and abstract matters such as those that concern Turner, it is empirically clear that hardly anyone in fact recognizes their validity, and it is very likely the case that only a small proportion of human beings could do so, even with the best intentions and the best catechesis. A small group of experts may discuss—and often disagree about—whether a proof of a par-

ticular mathematical theorem is valid; most of us have and should have no opinion about such things, except those yielded by our trust of (faith in) the expertise of mathematicians. Or, to take a different example, is Aquinas right over against Anselm about the possibility of so-called ontological arguments to God's existence? Turner thinks so; I don't. Is Aquinas right over against Kant about the possibility of broadly cosmological arguments to God's existence? Turner thinks so, and so do I. But Turner nowhere addresses the question of the degree of confidence we should have in our capacity to judge the validity of arguments about difficult matters like these. That degree is very slight, I think: We humans are not very good at thinking about things like this. In abstract reasoning we are forgetful, inattentive, often mistaken—and this is true even for that tiny minority of us with interest in and taste for such activities. Introspection and observation of others should show us this with abundant clarity, and this should keep us modest about whether, without appeal to something other than argument, we can recognize the validity of our own arguments or the truth of their conclusions. What might the something other include? Desire and catechesis taken to be authoritative, at the very least. Turner seems deaf and blind to all this, and indeed to the very question of the difference between an argument's validity and the recognizability of that validity. It is this blindness that leads him to think that cosmological arguments of the sort whose possibility he defends have "at least some theoretical power to convince the mind of the atheist" (227). By the end of the book (262), Turner withdraws some of the confidence he'd expressed earlier in the persuasive power of analogical-cosmological arguments: "some" becomes "not much." Better would be "vanishingly little."

This brings us to a third difficulty, that of knowledge-with-certainty's difference from knowledge *simpliciter*. Sometimes, Turner says that he wants to defend not just the claim that God's existence may be rationally demonstrable, but also the claim that "it is possible to know God by human reason with certainty" (23). This second claim is made explicitly (though not glossed) in the first of the *anathemata* on revelation proclaimed at the First Vatican Council, which is why Turner introduces it: "If anyone says that the one, true God, our creator and lord, cannot be known with certainty (*certo cognosci non posse*) by the natural light of human reason: let him be anathema." The council also made the first claim, as we have seen. But the two claims are different in much the same way that saying that something is true is different from saying that it is self-evidently or obviously so. The adverbial "with certainty" is deeply transformative, and in a very unclear way. The council did not explain itself, which is a good thing (theologians and philosophers need work); Turner also does not explain himself, but he says enough to make it pretty clear that in the case of knowledge-by-argument he takes "to know" and "to know with certainty" to be equivalent. This is a further and very striking

instance of collapsing the distinction between what an argument is, formally speaking, and what it is recognized or recognizable as. For me to assent to a claim on the basis of a valid argument is one thing; for me to recognize the argument as valid is another; for me to know and be able to say (themselves different) in what the argument's validity consists is yet another; and for me to know and be able to say that all actual and possible challenges to the validity of the argument are defeasible is still another. And this is not an exhaustive list by any means—it identifies a range of possibilities on a gamut. But where on this gamut does Turner think knowledge-with-certainty is located? He doesn't say, and seems not to see the need to say. My own inclination would be to say that I know nothing with certainty if I restrict the scope of what might produce knowledge to argument; and that I certainly know nothing with certainty solely on the basis of analogical-cosmological arguments of the kind Turner discusses. (It is another question whether the claims I've just made contradict those of the First Vatican Council; I don't think they do, but a long discussion would be needed about what the council might have meant by "the natural light of reason" and "with certainty" to show why.) Turner provides me no reason to think otherwise, and this lack is one more evidence of his overconfidence in our cognitive capacities where argument about difficult matters is concerned.

A fourth difficulty, this one very striking: Turner appears to take the claim that faith requires that God's existence be rationally demonstrable to entail that the rational demonstrability of God's existence itself be knowable by reason. This is odd. It is not ordinarily the case that faith's requiring some assertion entails that same assertion to be knowable by reason. This is not the case, for instance, with the doctrine of the Trinity. So why does Turner think the case in question different? He writes: "[I]f, on grounds of faith, it seems necessary to conclude that the existence of God is rationally demonstrable, then it must also be the case that that demonstrability of God's existence is knowable rationally" (4–5). And: "Faith cannot invent rational truths for itself of which reason could not know on its own terms" (5). Which entails that, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a rational truth. But leaving that aside we should also note:

[I]f we know that it is possible for natural reason to construct such inferences [scilicet analogical-cosmological ones to God's existence], then we know that it is possible for natural reason to know of the possibility of doing so . . . we know on grounds of faith that inference from creatures to God is possible; therefore, inference from creatures to God is possible.
(223)

Turner thinks, it seems, that it follows from some reasoner having constructed a valid inference from creatures to God that it is rationally knowable (to that reasoner? to others? to all?) that this is possible. But this only

follows if the distinct acts of constructing a valid argument and knowing that it is valid are conflated. They should be kept separate. It's perfectly possible that I might construct a valid argument and have little or no idea as to whether it is valid; or, I might construct a valid argument and wrongly take it to be invalid; or, I might construct an invalid argument and wrongly take it to be valid. These are not *recherché* imaginings: These things happen to me all the time, and if they don't happen to Turner he must be unusually angelic in his reasoning powers. If I'm right about this distinction, then it doesn't follow from God's existence being rationally knowable by analogical-cosmological argument that this fact is itself rationally knowable, and we have yet another example of Turner's confusion about the difference between an argument's properties and the recognition of those properties.

It remains to ask about the other part of Turner's thesis, which is that it is a matter of faith that reason be capable of what he takes it to be capable of. For if I am right that Turner is confused about what argument is and what it means to offer (and to accept) an argument, then this confusion must also have its effects upon his understanding of why faith requires a particular view of reason's acts. About this there are some general and some particular things to say. First, and most generally, Turner wishes to depict both reason and faith as participating in, and in their own distinctive ways imaging, the sacramental and Christological shape of reality. I won't here attempt a full recapitulation of what he means by this, but I will say that he is and must be right about it. Both reason and faith (however exactly their relations are construed) are modes by which we respond to the gift divinely given, whether through the first grace of creation evident in nature or the second grace of redemption evident in revelation. The responsive structure of each must at the deepest levels be the same, for its archetype is the same: the crucified and risen Lord. Neither faith nor reason can be self-sustaining or self-founded: Each responds in part uncomprehendingly to what is given, and neither will be necessary when we know as we are known, for love is the only one among the theological virtues that remains in heaven, and ratiocination is irrelevant when praise is the only signifying act. Turner takes reason's opening into its own inability to comprehend the God whose existence it demonstrates in the analogical-cosmological argument to be the chief evidence of its participation in this apophatic-cataphatic responsiveness. And this too is right: None of Turner's Augustinian-illuminationist discussion partners (not Augustine himself, not Bonaventure, not Milbank) would disagree.

The disagreement then is in the end only about the positive or constructive aspect of Turner's thesis about reason's acts and capacities. He thinks that reason cannot serve faith as faith demands that it should—as faith needs it to if *fides* is really to be *quaerens intellectum*—if its capacity to be confident in the validity of its argumentative offerings is denied, a

denial that he takes, as we've seen, to be equivalent to (or at least to entail) the denial that there are valid analogical-cosmological arguments to God's existence. But this is not so. Suppose we begin by allowing that there may be valid arguments of that sort; we should follow this with a denial that reasoners are typically in a position to be confident about the validity of such arguments; and we should conclude by advocating care in talk of reason as natural, reason's acts as independent of catechesis, and reason's products as transparent to reason's gaze. Then the principal function of reason will become apparent, which is to serve faith as it can and should by displaying, preferably with elegant and seductive power (that's how apologetics works, when it does), the conceptual structure of faith's knowledge. Faith will in turn serve reason by catechizing it with increasing subtlety and complexity, and thus permitting it to analyze, order, display, and (yes) argue for what faith teaches. Reason's limitations, its apophatic moments, about which Turner writes so lyrically in connection with arguments about God, will on this view go deeper than he allows. But that is only to say that reason is on my view more fully and more theologically understood than it is on his.

The skepticism I advocate about the transparency of reason's products to its own gaze has deep roots in the Christian tradition. For Catholics, that tradition runs from Augustine through Anselm and Pascal to Newman and beyond. I lack the expertise to judge whether Aquinas's views on these matters are really different; certainly some Thomists think so, and Turner is, it seems, among them. This is, therefore, an old debate. An advantage of the position I take in it is that I am required to have little intellectual confidence in my own rightness. I doubt that those on the other side can maintain consistency and say the same.