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I Cannot Convince Oppy: My Rejoinder to His Reply

Roberto Di Ceglie
Pontifical Lateran University
Vatican City, Rome

Abstract: I offer two developments of the two issues I had presented in a previous paper and that Oppy has kindly taken into account. First, Oppy rightly says that he never affirmed that his starting point was “what everybody knows”. However, both he and I need such a starting point, because it is the only one that permits us to discuss our topic and try to convince each other. Second, Oppy affirms that it is “just obvious [...] that a large part of any satisfactory comprehensive worldview will be utterly independent of distinctively Christian assumptions”. But Christian faith *doesn't promise to render believers more capable than non-believers*. It promises to render them better than they would be otherwise. However, I understand that Oppy is not convinced by my explanation, because, from the rational point of view, what I have just said is only *epistemically possible*. In other words, I understand that he remains confident in mere reason alone. But reason alone, though it be the only possible way of thinking and discussing, *is not free from contradiction*.

I didn't know whether Oppy would reply to my text, nor did I think that, if he replied, I, too, would wish to rejoin. But his comments – which I enjoyed and for which I sincerely thank him – were so acute that I felt it right and proper to continue our dialogue.

I intend to reply by offering two developments of the two issues I had presented in the previous paper and that Oppy has kindly taken into account.

First, Oppy rightly says that he never affirmed that his starting point was “what everybody knows”; moreover, he affirms that he doesn't think that should be philosophy's point of departure. But is it possible to discuss matters otherwise? How can we (Moser, Oppy, and I) discuss our topic and try to convince each other without referring to “what everybody knows”? Perhaps this expression is vague. It is of no matter. I can provide my reader with a clearer expression, taken from Alvin Plantinga: “What we all or nearly all know or take for granted or firmly believe, or what at any rate those conducting the inquiry know or take for granted or believe.”¹ Is Oppy still convinced that he is not starting from that? I agree with him entirely when

¹ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press 2000), p. 272.

he says that one of “the twin tasks of philosophy” is “to understand the philosophies of others (‘from the inside’)” (4). But how can one understand other philosophies from the inside without referring to such a common ground? In reality, both he and I need such a starting point, because it is the only one that permits us to advance proofs and demonstrations (such as I am doing now) that can convince only if based on what all people (or at least the interlocutors involved, he and I) hold in common.

Second, In the case of faith, however, things are different in several ways. Faith is my assent to divine revelation. It is possible thanks to God himself who leads me to love him, to see him as love in person, the highest good, and in consequence, to believe everything he tells me. God is the “chief and proper cause” of Christian faith.² For this reason, no reasoning involving the truths of faith – that is, reasoning not based only on what everybody knows – will convince those who don’t share the above mentioned truths. Yet there is something in common with the debate founded only on what everybody knows.

On the one hand, the believer can reflect on what his faith implies by using his natural reason. Of course, from the point of view consisting of what everybody knows, such faith represents only a *hypothesis*. As a result, the discourse in question is aimed at demonstrating that faith doesn’t lack internal rationality, namely that it is *epistemically possible*, and not that it is *true*: the believer cannot convince the non-believer.

On the other hand, the believer can develop another form of rational reflection: he can wonder whether, from the rational point of view based on what everybody knows, those who reject faith, and affirm that any philosophical (or scientific) discourse must be founded only on what everybody knows, are, in fact, in a superior epistemological condition, as is generally taken for granted.

In the first case, the believer deepens the truths of faith. In the second case, he seeks to show that the opposing positions are inconsistent (I am referring to what Aquinas teaches on how to use reason with respect to faith: see his *On Boethius’ De Trinitate*.³ In neither case, can the faithful convince of the truth of faith those who are not (yet) believers. In both cases, their reasoning is stimulated by the fact that, thanks to divine grace, they love God and want to know as much as possible about him and everything related to him, including how to respond to non-believers’ objections.

This is precisely what I am trying to do here. Let me focus on one of the many objections raised by Oppy (in a confined space such this, raising many objections is easier than responding to them). I intend to do so by

² See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 6, a. 1, ad 1.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *On Boethius’ De Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3.

following the first way mentioned above, that is, by deepening the truths of faith.

In my previous paper I focused on the union of the believer with the person of Christ, on the fact that knowing God implies taking part in the good that he himself is, that is, knowing God implies becoming better to understand more. Considering matters solely from a rational point of view – that rationality which Oppy and I share (though, unlike me, he trusts only in that) –, it is epistemically possible that the condition of the believer is intellectually privileged. If the condition of belief is due to God, the omnipotent and omniscient creator of all things, faith in him should constitute the best position to know everything. According to the more specific Christian view, God is love itself, and the faithful should love their neighbour as they love themselves, while they should reject any intellectual limit caused by evil (e.g., exaggerated self-confidence, intellectual arrogance, lack of consideration of others' reflections, precipitation in coming to conclusions out of the desire to receive approval and rewards as soon as possible for what one has done). Of course, it was my intention to show that this position is epistemically possible, and not to convince Oppy that it is true. And in fact, he remains unconvinced – and rightly so, from his point of view – by my explanation. But his rhetorical question: whether it is acceptable to say that only saints philosophize well (4), is not acceptable. True, he is right when he says that it is “just obvious [...] that a large part of any satisfactory comprehensive worldview will be utterly independent of distinctively Christian assumptions” (4): in other words, it is clear that it is not necessary to be a believer to possess acute or sometimes extraordinary intellectual abilities; it is evident that *some* non-believers can achieve theoretical goals superior to those achieved by *some* believers (analogously, *some* non-believers can be morally superior to *some* believers). However, if what is at issue here is the role that faith can play in intellectual human activity, we shouldn't consider the various intellectual conditions in which human beings can find themselves; on the contrary, we should take into consideration the fact that, *under different intellectual conditions*, faith allows believers to do *more than they can by reason alone* (or, more generally, by nature). In fact, what does Jesus affirm about himself and those who decide to follow him? Does he promise that the nature of things will be *changed*? True, it is possible that the man born blind will be miraculously cured by Jesus, but this is not what distinguishes Christian faith from other beliefs: Jesus teaches and bears testimony to the fact that the greatest miracle consists of being happy despite the cause of suffering not having been removed. In sum, faith, if truly lived, *doesn't promise to render believers more capable than non-believers!* It promises to render them *better than they would be otherwise*. Faith is *not a way to feel superior to others*. Indeed, another typical feature of Christianity is the *responsibility* of the faithful. Faith is chiefly *God's gift*. Christians are aware that God expects more from them than from those who have not

received (or have not yet received) the same gift (see the parable of the talents). Such individuals could even be preferred to Christians (“prostitutes and publicans will enter the Kingdom before you”): if faith is principally the willingness to receive God and his truths, it can somehow be ascribed even to those who don’t belong explicitly to Christian churches (see the Thomistic concept of “implicit faith.”⁴ Christians are expected *not to adopt a superior air*; on the contrary, they should feel more *responsible* and *ready to obey Jesus’ command to love*. Love (at least in paradigmatic cases) enables the faithful to consider others superior to themselves (see Phil 2:3). Consequently, the faithful don’t blame others. Quite the contrary: they tend to appreciate anything coming from others, and this surely helps them to make progress in everything, obviously in proportion to the condition in which they find themselves.

But I understand that Oppy doesn’t agree with me, because, from the rational point of view, what I have just said is only epistemically possible.

However, there is one more way (the second way mentioned above) of rational reflection that the faithful can develop. It consists of what is traditionally called “negative apologetics”. If Oppy has good reasons not to be convinced by my explanation, and remains confident in mere reason alone, I may still ask whether reason alone is, indeed, free from limits and contradictions. This is why in my previous paper I presented an argument that seems to me particularly effective: I compared the philosophy whose origin is also the Christian faith with the philosophy which, in order to be “purely rational”, tries to start only from what in principle everybody knows, and *I argued that the former is epistemically superior to the latter vis-à-vis the body of knowledge based on what everyone knows*.

Roberto Di Ceglie teaches Philosophy of Religion at Pontifical Lateran University (Vatican City), and has been Visiting Scholar at Notre Dame University for 3 years.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 2, a. 5.