

A. MacIntyre, *God, philosophy, universities. A selective history of the Catholic philosophical tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2009. Pp. 193.

The three main characters of this «philosophical drama» are just introduced by Alasdair MacIntyre in the title of the book: «God, philosophy, universities». It is a «philosophical drama», because it tells of the long history of the Catholic philosophical tradition and it describes the work of its most important thinkers, their questions and their philosophical solutions proposed at the meeting-point between religion and philosophy.

God is the object of this long research. He is one, omnipotent and omniscient. He exists necessarily because of His perfection and infinity. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the theism (from the perspective of people who believe in such an infinite God, endowed with all the attributes of a person), there are three unavoidable philosophical problems to cope with. The first problem is «the problem of whether and how belief in the existence of God is compatible with recognition of the extent of natural, social and moral evil in the universe of finite beings» (p. 6). If God is omnipotent, He is also responsible for evil and He is not perfect, nor good. But if He is perfect and good, He cannot be responsible for evil. And if He is not responsible for evil, He is not responsible for all the created things: He is not omnipotent. So we could say that God must be omnipotent *or* good, but He cannot be omnipotent *and* good. The Catholic philosophers must provide a solution to preserve the possibility of having both omnipotence and supreme goodness in the same, divine subject.

The second problem «is whether and how belief in the existence of God is compatible with belief in the powers of finite beings, the powers that belong to inanimate objects, the powers that belong to animal bodies, and the powers of rational will that belong to human beings» (*Ibidem*). It seems obvious that the most important aspect of this problem is the relation between God's will and human free will. If God is omnipotent, He can do what He wants. But if men are free, there are some actions (those resulting from human free will) which cannot be controlled by God. According to this exposition of the problem, theism cannot preserve both the independence of finite beings and the omnipotence of God.

The third problem is that «in trying to speak of God we are extending our use of words and the application of our concepts, so that we no longer understand what we mean when we talk about God to the same extent and in the same way that we do in our speech about finite beings» (p. 7). If we are created by God, we are finite beings and God is infinite. But if we are finite beings, we can only use finite words.

And we cannot use finite words to talk about God, because God is infinite. If we could understand God and know all His attributes, we could be infinite, such as God. But we are not infinite, so it is evident that we cannot understand God, nor we cannot know His own attributes.

These problems are not simply intellectual questions, which can be asked and investigated without any connection with our concrete existential experience. MacIntyre writes: «to believe that God exists is to believe that there is a being on my relationship to whom depends everything that I do or might value. And this being requires of me unqualified trust and unqualified obedience, so that I cannot be indifferent to claims about His existence and nature» (p. 8).

If God is the aim of this drama (He is the aim of all the philosophical investigations, because all philosophers want to find the sufficient reason of the existence of themselves and of the world), the philosophers are the heroes who try to fight against false solutions and look for the truth. Not all philosophers are believers, nor all philosophers are Christian nor Catholic: philosophy is different from religion, but it is not necessarily in opposition to religion. If we think that philosophy is upfront characterised by an opposition to religion; if we think that philosophers are very different from all other people, because they live in a particular world and they ask strange, particular questions about everything; if we have such a conception of philosophy and of philosophers, we simply have a bad idea of them. Philosophy is strictly connected with human existence: «all human beings, whatever their culture, find themselves confronted by questions about the nature and significance of their lives» (p. 9). All human beings are philosophers «*in potentia*», because all the philosophical questions are human and existential questions. The several religions appeared during the long course of human history have given to these questions particular answers, which have been characterised by different contents and different ways of expression. Philosophy appears «when someone asks whether something hitherto commonly and unquestioningly taken to be a religious truth is in fact true» (*Ibidem*). It seems quite important to understand this claim. The contents of philosophical investigation can be provided by philosophy but, from the point of view of history, can also be provided by other sources, such as religion or poetry. We can say that philosophers are not self-sufficient: they do not have to construct their solutions without regard to anything else. Philosophy does not begin with a «*tabula rasa*», but with some questions about something which is already given. The most characteristic philosophical questions about some given claim are: «But is it true?», «Do we have sufficient reason to assert it?», «What do we mean when we assert it?». As a matter of principle, the answers to these questions are not in opposition to religion. We can also say that religious answers are true and we can justify them by our philosophical investigation. If we are interested in truth, we do not have to think that we must construct truth by our reason, after having destroyed all the constructions of other people and other methods, but we have to recognise what is true and what is not true and we have to give good and sufficient explanations of our solutions to ourselves and to other philosophers.

In my opinion, this way of approaching the problem of the relation between reason and faith is particularly interesting and useful. Many talks have been made

about this problem and many people have said that, if we philosophize, we cannot believe in something which is not given by our own philosophical investigation. Philosophy and religion can be both pursued by the same person, but they have different methods, different objects and attitudes. These talks often start from particular conceptions of «faith» and «reason» and end with a radical disagreement, because it seems that Christians (or theists) and atheists give different meanings to these words and cannot reach common solutions. The «reason» and the «faith» of the theist look different from the «reason» and the «faith» of the atheist: the atheist can think that he is the only legitimate representative of the strong powers of reason, in opposition to the theist, who cannot provide a rational justification to his beliefs; the theist, from his own point of view, can think that the atheist does not use all of his reason and restrict in advance (without giving adequate reasons) his field of investigation. This «relativistic solution» (if we are allowed to think that this expression is not nonsense, nor self-refuting) does not seem adequate. If we think that a belief must be true or false, and if we also think that a philosophical solution must be true or false, we are not allowed to separate the path of faith and the path of reason so sharply, because they share the same aim (the pursuit of truth), although they use different methods. Nevertheless, there is one possible objection against this argument: we can think that our religious beliefs must be true or false, but we can also think that we have no power to verify them.

MacIntyre suggests an answer to this objection, which sounds quite similar to Étienne Gilson's answer to the same problem (the problem of the relation between reason and faith, philosophy and religion): we can investigate the history of philosophy and check whether someone has been Christian (or theist) *and* philosopher. The question is: have there been any philosophers who have tried to answer to philosophical questions in a philosophical way, without rejecting their own Christian (or theistic) beliefs but, on the contrary, by exploring the meaning and the truth-value of such beliefs?

The possibility of a positive answer is justified by the history of the Catholic philosophical tradition from Augustine to the encyclical *Fides et ratio*, that MacIntyre describes in the central part of the book. We cannot summarize all the several moments of this history, because we do not want to disclose all the development of the drama to the readers. MacIntyre uses a clear and ordered way of exposition, which is quite important to let all the people (and not only the «professional» philosophers) understand the meaning of the questions investigated and of the solutions given by Catholic philosophers. But we have to point out that, according to the author, the history of the Catholic philosophical tradition is not only the history of the medieval philosophical tradition: there have been important medieval philosophers who have not been Catholic, as well as there have been important non-medieval Catholic philosophers (such as Newman). One of the aims of these chapters is to demonstrate that, although there have been many contrasts between the mainstream of the Catholic philosophical tradition and the mainstream of the modern philosophy, there have been (and there must be) also many possibilities of dialogue and critical comparison between Catholic and non-Catholic modern philosophers.

In the end, we must describe also the principal setting of the drama: the universities. The medieval *Studia* and the subsequently founded universities were for a long time the places where pursuit and teaching of the truth were possible. But, as the author writes, «we are able to understand what the university should be, only if we understand what the universe is» (p. 95). And if the universe is ordered by some rules and if all the members of the universe are strictly connected one with each other, we cannot deny that the result of our pursuit of truth must coincide with a complete and organic description of the entire order of the existing things. All the academic disciplines must be connected, because every discipline studies particular aspects of the same objects. Nevertheless, in contemporary universities there is quite a different situation: «and so the very notion of the nature and of order of things, of a single universe, different aspects of which are objects of enquiry for the various disciplines, but in such a way that each aspect needs to be related to every other, this notion no longer informs the enterprise of the contemporary American university. It has become an irrelevant concept» (p. 16).

From this point of view, the mission of Catholic philosophers is the same mission of every human being interested in giving a complete and true account of the reality. We have to give an account of what «is to be a human being» and «such an account will have to integrate what we can learn about the nature and constitution of human beings from physicists, chemists, and biologists, historians, economists, and sociologists, with the kind of understanding of human beings that only theology can afford» (p. 177). This self-understanding of human beings requires a «large cooperative venture» between philosophy, theology and secular disciplines: «philosophical enquiry cannot be pursued in isolation from enquiry in those other disciplines» (p. 179). There is no doubt about the goodness of such an enterprise. But it seems quite difficult to realize it because of the strong specialization of each discipline and of each scholar. I think that our interest in the proper nature of human beings is not a sufficient reason for dialogue, if we are not primarily interested in truth: we can look for a true description of what human beings are, only if we engage in a sincere pursuit of truth. And a sincere pursuit of truth is possible only if we *believe in* truth. A sincere and good chemist, for example, cannot be indifferent to philosophy, if only he wants to discover the true structure of reality. And a sincere philosopher cannot be indifferent to science, if only he wants to discover something true about human beings, reality and God (or about the metaphysical principle of reality). Without this honest and sincere attention to the truth and to all the people and disciplines who look for the truth, it does not seem possible to make a good philosophical enterprise. Without our belief in truth, our philosophy becomes a half-hearted, unintelligible chat between half-hearted graduate-professionals.

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