

God and the Philosopher

God and the Knowledge of Reality, by Thomas Molnar, *New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973. 237 pp. \$10.00.*

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES of this book are twofold: to sound a warning that the philosophical enterprise is seriously ill and to urge the adoption of "genuine moderate realism" as a means of restoring philosophy to health. Professor Molnar's approach to these objectives is unique and in some respects more compelling than the specific antidote he prescribes. Philosophy is seen as a stepchild of theology ("the long tradition encompassing thinkers, mystics and esoteric magicians") that would attempt to remove itself from its proper home at the risk of wandering lost and forlorn in a desert of subjectivist confusion and moral skepticism. "The philosophical enterprise can never definitively exclude from its scope the domain of the God-problem."

The God-problem, according to Molnar, is the adoption by philosophers and religious thinkers of any one of three distinct attitudes toward God. The first stance (called position A) is to regard God as inaccessible. The second (called position B) is to regard him as immanent. The third (called position C and preferred by Molnar) is to regard God as transcendent and personal. The first two, either separately or together, have been in ascendancy throughout history and dominate philosophical thought today. Put simply, they are nothing more "than an attempt to escape from position C," since in regarding God (or Being) as inaccessible or immanent man promotes himself to a position of divine majesty, consistent with man's "search for a perfect, that is *unmediated*, form of knowledge." Men have traditionally rejected position C "where the knowing self is understood to be limited while the object of knowledge is presented as guaranteed by a transcendent creator. The dissociation of subject and

object exasperates many thinkers who see in it a limitation, a diminution of man, and a barrier set up against a reconstructed reality with its epistemological, moral, and political derivations."

Much of the book is a fascinating and engrossing scenario of the history of the philosopher's "magical quest" for absolute knowledge and ideal community—and his continued frustration due to inevitable failure. What philosophers must realize is the "intellectual *hubris*" involved in this quest and the need for acceptance of position C which, since it regards God as transcendent and yet personal, posits a reality that is independent of man and yet knowable by him—within limits. As Molnar puts it, "only position C offers an ontology and an epistemology harmonizing with our actual experience, namely, that man is a full being within limitations and that he possesses full (reliable, valid) knowledge, also within limitations." This is the position which Molnar characterizes as genuine, moderate realism and proffers as the only plausible response to the query: "what are the conditions of rehabilitating the philosophical discourse that has reached an impasse with the absolutization of knowledge and self and with the consequent absolutization of the community?"

Molnar states the problem forcibly near the end of his presentation when he says:

In position A, the removal of God from man's scope renders the world fragile, evil, divided, illusory, and ultimately meaningless because unknowable. In position B, the immanentization of God in man's soul similarly reduces the extramental world to a state of imperfection, porousness, division, and vanity—facing a self that, as a maturing being on the way to divine status, will carry the world along to an ontologically perfected status. The outcome will be neither the same self nor the same world. What I call position C represents the equilibrium. God's transcendence blocks the self's absolutization and com-

pels it to face its inherent limitations, which the constitution of being daily demonstrates as anchored in reality, and God's personalness guarantees the reality of the world and the self, the knowledge and the meaning.

While there is considerable room for agreement with Professor Molnar that philosophy is in deep trouble, there is a distinct possibility that he has committed a *petitio principii* by defending position C, or moderate realism, after defining knowledge as "based on the distinct existence of a subject and an object." To say this is not to deny the originality or the importance of Molnar's conception of philosophy as chiefly concerned with the "God-problem," together with his most interesting characterization of the various philosophical movements within the framework of positions A and B. One very nice example of this is his characterization of one such view as "a variety of position A, today, as often in the past, very popular because it excludes, together with the personal God of religion, metaphysics too because it presents these centuries with a seemingly sober guarantee for scientific investigations." This point is elaborated by a detailed examination of "the Kantian [view]—and much of modern speculation down to Wittgenstein," which regards reality as a subjective creation and morality as fundamentally situational, and which comprises in his book an important foil with which Molnar engages to establish his position.

Molnar insists that Kant's attempts to ground his ontology on the knowing subject fail, for all practical purposes, because "individuals possess intelligence and moral sense to varying degrees." If Molnar is to avoid the possibility of the *petitio principii* mentioned above, he must show how his view—moderate realism—avoids the pitfalls that he insists confounded Kant. That is to say, if we are to accept his definition of knowledge as necessarily presupposing the distinct existence of a subject and an object, we must do so because all other epis-

temologies fail—in principle—as a result of their grounding on inadequate ontologies. What the followers of Kant have done with Kant's ontology, however, does not prove that his ontology is inadequate; only that it has been inadequately understood. Neither will it suffice to argue that Kant's position reduces itself to subjectivism simply because Kant grounds his ontology on the nature of the knowing subject, since it is on man's common, rational nature that Kant bases his epistemology and his moral philosophy. The variability of subjects is incidental. Molnar must show how grounding epistemology on position C allows it to avoid the subjectivism he finds attendant upon the Kantian view which he sees as grounded on position A. This he seeks to do when he says, "If God is conceived as radically different from man but not distant, and as accessible and knowable to him but not identical with him, then creation will be understood as being of a limited nature but in confident contact with the creator who guarantees it and *presents* it when lending it existence." Thus, it would seem that Molnar avoids the problems alluded to above by a modern day leap of faith, reminiscent of Augustine's dictum that "it is necessary to believe in order to know."

On the level of our knowledge of the real world, however, moderate realism would seem to have many of the same problems as the Kantian position: subjective perception varies and claims must be settled by an appeal to a common world—be it called a real world or a world of possible experience. Molnar's stance that the world is in principle knowable—but not absolutely—does not seem to differ widely, on an epistemological level, from the view that it is ultimately unknowable. The key seems to

be the answer to the question: what difference does it make as far as the avoidance of a "subjectivistic epistemology" is concerned to argue that reality is unknowable in fact or unknowable in principle? Molnar's concern is to "prevent man from climbing the ontological ladder and transmuting himself into a higher being with higher knowledge." This was precisely Kant's concern in writing a *critique* of pure reason, and Molnar must be wary lest his theistic guarantee be taken as license to claim complete knowledge and position C collapse back into positions A or B. In point of fact, one of the major shortcomings of Molnar's argument, it seems to me, is the lack of specificity in his notion of a theistic guarantee and, indeed, with the question of the precise relation of God to our knowledge of the real world. Until this point is clarified, the chief difference between Molnar's position and that of Kant seems to be one of attitude based on an ontology that, on the one hand, posits an independent real world, guaranteed by God, and, on the other hand, one that is grounded on man's rationality as such. In either case there are limits to knowledge since in neither case is reality grasped in its totality. But Molnar's moderate realism taken together with his theism would seem to provide grounds for optimism since it does not attempt to state *a priori* what the limits of human knowledge are, whereas the Kantian *Ding an sich* may well promote pessimism because it does precisely that. Each in its way provides "the beginning of wisdom," but in our age and given the present state of the philosophical enterprise it may well be advisable to share Professor Molnar's mood of optimism—and his faith.

Reviewed by HUGH MERCER CURTLER