

GOD AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY by Brian Wicker.

WHO IS GOD? by Reginald McCurdy.

'Where we Stand' series; Darton Longman and Todd, 2s each paperback, 6s 6d cloth.

The publishers have hit on the excellent idea of putting out two books dealing with the same problem yet tackling it in very different ways, so that the sixth-formers for whom these books are intended can exercise their critical powers. The problem in each case is to find a valid line of reasoning by which to lead a non-believer towards accepting that God exists.

Both authors see that any correct form of argument must involve a whole system of causes and effects rather than a single 'chain'. Indeed Mr Wicker goes out of his way to show why that common variant of the apologetics books is false: for an effect is quite adequately explained by its immediate cause and doesn't require a first cause as well in order to be understood. The universe is a better candidate than any part of it for the role of pointing to God.

But how should 'universe' be understood in this connection? Here there are two major points of difference. First, for Fr McCurdy the obvious place to begin the argument is from ourselves. 'It is as plain as plain can be', he says, 'that our consciousness shows us to be limited, changing, mortal and supported beings.' It is almost in an aside that he adds to this category, 'whatever else may be around'. Secondly, he can take what seems, from this point of view, only a small step. All things must be 'dependent in their existence'; 'the whole collection of things is dependent also'. For him it is self-evident, without need for discussion, that 'universe' in this argument means 'all there is', and that he has shown that this universe is 'dependent'. The final conclusion to something on which it depends is scarcely unexpected, since this is one of those verbs that require an object.

Now Mr Wicker, by contrast, starts with the world of interacting agencies such as a scientist talks about. He needs to justify the notion of causal agency in science, as opposed to constant conjunction, and does this by pointing to the way in which scientists in practice, despite the philosophers, do go on looking for the agents that account for phenomena, and could indeed be hard put to it to explain states of equilibrium other than by the interference of one agent with another. This is neither to imagine that scientific laws are explanatory in the same way, nor to wish to defend a general 'principle of causality'.

Next he considers the total collection of such agents as could in principle be open to scientific investigation. His sense of 'universe' for the purpose of the argument is therefore not 'all there is', but simply 'whatever is a possible object of experience'. Indeed he examines as 'a common form of bad argument' the attempt to include 'all there is' within the universe in this context, because this allows one to smuggle in the idea of 'dependence', 'contingency' or whatever, outside any possible experience of its application. Thus the extension to God as that on which all depends has already been made without our noticing.

Mr Wicker, then, deals with a limited system: and by three detailed lines of reasoning he characterizes it as changing, as capable of ceasing to be, and as having direction or tendency. So for him the real crux of the argument has yet to come: he must ask of this clearly-defined universe the question quite proper to put to any part of it: does it demand a cause? All he can do is to show the question is reasonable; it is not possible to compel anyone to ask it. But, answered, it leads to a conclusion that is reasonably modest: not

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everything can be of the kind we know within the system. There must also be that which isn't something else like objects within the system, alongside them, able to be counted up as one of them. A cause of this universe of changing objects does transcend it: and a Christian who follows the argument may identify this cause with the God who has revealed himself to our faith.

This kind of reasoning (natural theology) is less fashionable among Christians than once it was, partly because it is usually badly done, partly too because it has been overworked and turned almost into a substitute for revelation, like the appeal to natural law in moral theology. Personally, I would have liked to see Mr Wicker give more place than he does to the way in which arguments of this kind work within faith to bring understanding; but since he has stuck to natural theology it is a great relief to find such sound logic. To be fair to Fr McCurdy, he has less space in which to deal with the argument, since there is a second half to his book in which he investigates the nature of God, but he relies far more on mere assertion than on logical reasoning.

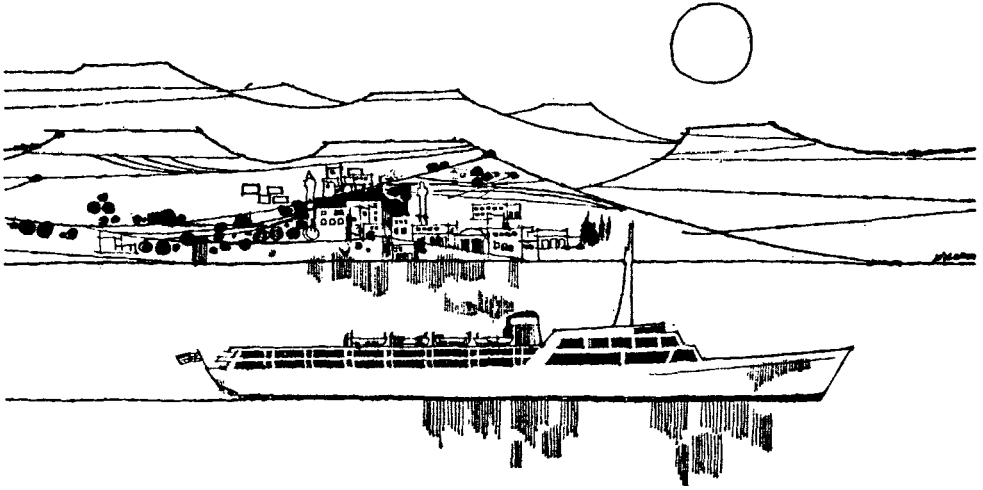
This of course is not his own fault: it is simply that he is writing within a tradition of natural theology from which Mr Wicker has been able to escape, as he says, I think with justice, through the guidance both of modern English philosophy and of St Thomas. The basic point of difference is that the older tradition is firmly empiricist. For an empiricist (the classical example is Locke) the correct philosophical procedure is to 'abstract'

from a total context and 'inspect' the object thus isolated: the favourite object of inspection is one's own mind. To those who think like this there is nothing odd about saying, as Fr McCurdy does, 'if you want to know what the colour red is you must turn to an example of it; if you want to know what thinking is you must carefully watch the mind in action.' What has happened here to the complex world of human communication, of language, in which long and patient work is needed to sort out the meanings such concepts do in fact have? It is not surprising that Fr McCurdy begins his investigation with 'human consciousness' (a highly complex concept in itself), readily draws out from it the notion of dependence, and cheerfully extends this to 'all there is'. Mr Wicker works throughout in a more manageable context.

The majority of Catholics who lapse at school, probably through boredom, pass into a kind of indifference. Only the more intelligent of them are driven into active atheism by the triviality of the arguments by which we disguise the faith. Mr Wicker's book will not convert them: only the full proclamation of God's word has that power. But it will shake them to find Catholic reasoning that is intellectually honest. I certainly can think of no other book on this subject that is philosophically respectable and yet simple enough for everyone to read. Schools, chaplaincies, adult education centres should be buying it in bulk.

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