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Randy Ramal: ***On philosophy, intelligibility, and the ordinary: Going the bloody hard way***

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This is a book about the purpose and methods of philosophy in general, with potentially far-reaching implications for the philosophy of religion in particular. The injunction to "Go the bloody *hard* way" derives from Wittgenstein, as reported by his student and friend Rush Rhees (Rhees 1969, p. 169; Ramal 2021, p. xiv). Randy Ramal understands this injunction to mean that philosophy ought to be concerned with doing conceptual or descriptive justice to the variety of perspectives that exist on life and the world rather than seeking to promote any one perspective at the expense of others. In this respect, Ramal is in accordance with figures in the Wittgensteinian tradition such as Rhees, Peter Winch, and D. Z. Phillips, all of whom made important contributions to the philosophy of religion. In view of its subject matter—and its subtitle—one could be forgiven for expecting the book to be largely devoted to exposition and analysis of this Wittgensteinian lineage. However, overt references to Wittgenstein and the philosophers he inspired come to the fore only occasionally. The philosopher at the center of the book is in fact Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), famous for his promotion of what has come to be known as process philosophy. Although the amount of attention that Whitehead receives from Ramal becomes less surprising when one notices that the book is published in Lexington Books' "Contemporary Whitehead Studies" series, it remains an intriguing choice on Ramal's part to seek to articulate and advocate a strictly "non-normative" conception of philosophy through extensive engagement with the work of a speculative metaphysician such as Whitehead.

As is intimated in the book's main title, Ramal's principal contention is that philosophy is and ought to be concerned—exclusively—with bringing out "the intelligibility of ordinary forms of discourse" (ix). Philosophy, he affirms, "is the unbiased discipline that tidies up confusion in people's thinking when sense is displaced and intelligibility lost" (xvii). This "unbiased" (or "neutral") enterprise is thus entitled, according to Ramal, to adjudicate about when people are confused in their misuses of languages but not about how people ought to live their lives or the values they ought to adopt. The justification for concentrating on Whitehead is the fact that a deep ambivalence is discernible in Whitehead's work, an ambivalence that takes the form of a dual "oscillation." As Ramal puts it, "Whitehead oscillates unwittingly in his practice of philosophy between treating it as a descriptive activity … and as a normative activity" (18). This wavering conception of philosophy generates a further oscillation in Whitehead's attitude toward "ordinariness" or "the ordinary" or, more specifically, "ordinary discourse." In some instances, he trusts ordinary ways of speaking; in other instances, he distrusts them, favoring the view that philosophy ought to "transcend the vague verbal statements of everyday discourse" and replace them with a more precise metaphysical vocabulary (78). Ramal thus takes Whitehead to be illustrative of a genuine attempt to "go the bloody hard way"—associated with an approach that remains loyal to ordinary language—combined with recurrent backsliding into prescriptive specifications about how language must be regimented if the underlying reality of things is to be adequately delineated.

The methodological stance around which the book pivots is of considerable relevance to philosophy of religion because the business of this latter subfield of philosophy is routinely assumed to consist in arguing for conclusions that, if accepted, should have normative implications for religious beliefs, attitudes, and ways of life. Thus, although overtly religious themes are not foregrounded in every chapter, the book's ramifications for thought about

religion are pervasive. Whitehead himself wrote extensively on religious matters from the 1920s onwards, perhaps his best known sole-authored work being *Process and Reality*, which was based on his Gifford Lectures of 1927–28. Culminating in a conception of God as "the infinite ground of all mentality" and "the poet of the world, with tender patience leading it by his vision of truth, beauty, and goodness" (Whitehead 1978, pp. 348, 346; cf. Ramal 2021, p. 183), *Process and Reality* is undoubtedly one of the major contributions to a normatively oriented philosophy of religion of the last century. References to God and religion are thus plentiful in Ramal's book, the most sustained treatment coming in Chapter 6, titled "Inverting the Logic of Ordinary Atheism with Flew and Dawkins." In that chapter, Ramal argues that, notwithstanding his affirmation of God's reality, Whitehead shares with proponents of atheism such as Anthony Flew and Richard Dawkins, the tendency to invert the relation of logical priority between a metaphysical theory of God, on the one hand, and "the religious practices that speak of God and atheism," on the other (xxiv). For Ramal, it is precisely the practices and everyday talk about God to which philosophers ought to attend if they are to understand the religious concepts at issue: to suppose that one can bypass everyday religious parlance and ground one's position, whether theological or atheistic, in a metaphysical theory is to commit "the fallacy of logical inversion" (157–159).

The perceptive analysis of Whitehead's procedure in Chapter 6 typifies Ramal's strategy of pointing out how, despite claiming to be basing his normative recommendations on metaphysical argumentation, Whitehead's position depends in significant respects upon personal preferences derived from outside philosophy. Notably, Whitehead favors the conception of a God of love that is especially prevalent in the Johannine texts of the New Testament, rather than the image of God as a vengeful punisher that is found in, among other places, certain letters attributed to Paul (e.g. 2 Thessalonians 1:8). Ramal does not object to these theological proclivities of Whitehead's; what he questions is whether they can be rooted

in a metaphysical theory or whether, instead, they reflect personal religious values that are logically prior to any theoretical justification (177). A troubling characteristic of Whitehead's method, Ramal contends, is his propensity "not only to systematize by generalization but also to think that the theorized generalization is logically antecedent to the historical-experiential" (179); Ramal's criticism is thus implicitly targeted at a certain style of metaphysical philosophy more generally, a style that fails to remember that, when faith seeks understanding through theoretical inquiry, the faith itself does not forgo its logical priority.

Also in Chapter 6, Ramal makes some effort to extend the parameters of his analysis beyond Abrahamic religions by briefly examining the conception of divinity propounded in the *Bhagavad Gītā.* Although Ramal's treatment of this Hindu classic is Indologically naïve, apparently relying solely on the edition produced by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, his basic point is well taken. The point is that insisting, as Whitehead does, on prioritizing a conception of God purportedly based on metaphysical reasoning over religious articulations embedded in traditional texts and practices, leads to overgeneralizations which fail to do justice to the plurality of religious viewpoints. Once again, the implications of this observation for philosophy of religion are extensive.

If the book has one major weakness, it is the overconfident exclusiveness of Ramal's conception of philosophy. Rather than simply arguing for the benefits of an approach that emphasizes description, clarification, and interpretation over those that push normative prescriptions, Ramal repeatedly maintains that it is only the former and not the latter that qualifies as philosophy at all. On the opening page of the Preface, he asserts that "philosophers should not allow their normative biases to get in the way of doing good philosophical work" (ix). This contention is unobjectionable: biases can undoubtedly prevent one from gaining a clear view of the phenomena under investigation. However, Ramal proceeds to assert of philosophers that "their normative interventions in politics, ethics,

religion, economics, and other practical areas of human existence should not count as philosophical" (ibid.). No matter how sympathetic one is to a Wittgenstein-inspired descriptive orientation in philosophy, the stipulation (a normative and prescriptive stipulation, no less) that certain putative philosophical endeavors, which have been widely accepted as philosophical across multiple contexts, do not deserve to be called philosophy after all, is liable to come across as imperious.

Ramal appears to assume that the very nature of philosophy—or "philosophy proper"—is to be non-normative and that, if any argument is required, the onus is on the would-be normative philosopher to justify how any normative claim may legitimately be regarded as philosophical. "If one still insists on the need for philosophy to be normative," Ramal avers, "what is needed … is a non-normative argument as to how philosophy could still be different from normative practices if it engages in the same normative suggestions as theirs" (226–227). Here, Ramal seems to be assuming that any normatively driven philosophy would, by dint of its normative aspirations, be indistinguishable from "normative practices" other than philosophy. I suspect, however, that many philosophers would question why normativity must be treated as the only dimension along which philosophy could differ from other disciplines. Might it not differ from those other disciplines with respect to, for example, its degree of argumentative rigor, its capacity for making clear conceptual distinctions, and its participation in specific traditions of recognizably philosophical debate that have persisted over long historical periods?

Speaking for myself, I consider the sort of descriptive approach espoused by Ramal to be important and illuminating. When philosophy is pursued with a normative agenda—whether ethical, political, religious, or of any other stripe—the agenda can indeed, and often does, militate against due attentiveness to the diversity of possible perspectives on the issues at hand. There are thus good reasons for "going the bloody hard way" by striving to bring out

the intelligibility in multiple "first-order" or "ordinary" modes of activity and discourse without rushing to dictate which of these modes is superior to the others. Much of Ramal's analysis in this book—both of Whitehead's work and of the work of others with whom he draws informative comparisons and contrasts—helps to show how competing impulses can pull against one another, including the impulse to appeal to ordinary uses of language and the impulse to devise alternative vocabularies that supposedly improve upon the ordinary. It just was not clear to me on what authority we should accept the view that "non-normative" is "the way philosophy is meant to be" (8).

References

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