

adequately account for the expansive experiential horizons of the Holy Spirit.

In the end the Wilesian project is not a remaking of Christian doctrine, but the attempt to remake a doctrine that ceased to exist with the call of Abraham. Actually, it perished when God (if a poetic expression may be excused) said: "Let there be light."

## Reviews

**RESPONSIBILITY**, by J.R. Lucas. *Oxford University Press, Oxford.* 1993.

What is "responsibility"? Perhaps the question gives us the odd feeling its analogue about time gave St. Augustine: "So long as no one asks me what it is, I can tell; when I try to say what it is, I cannot tell". Responsibility is clearly a vital concept for any society remotely like ours — perhaps for any civil society whatever. Yet despite the obvious importance of the notion judges, philosophers, theologians, sociologists, historians and ordinary people often betray deep-seated confusions about it. This may be particularly so nowadays, when it looks to many as if determinism of some sort must be true, leaving little room for (at any rate) the particular notion of responsibility that our society has used ever since the arrival of Christianity.

In his engaging, learned and readable new book, John Lucas ventures an answer to our question. In many ways his answer is, or entails, a deliberate reaffirmation of certain traditional or intuitively natural views — e.g. about our freedom of will and consequent moral responsibility, and about the consequent need for punishment and reward in society; also about the merits of participative democracy as an expression of our belief in the different but equal responsibilities both of rulers and of ruled. Among the many other issues he touches on, Lucas also reaffirms views about the role of women in society which, while they are certainly traditional, will not seem intuitively natural to many "modern-minded" people (Lucas's phrase, p.93). (I confess that they do not seem so to me, which perhaps makes me modern-minded.) But this is a side-show; Lucas's central suggestion, an interesting and plausible one of which he gives a most original and able statement and defence, is that responsibility means what, given its etymology, we might expect it to mean: answerability (p.5). "To be responsible is to be answerable. . . I can equally well say I am answerable for an action or accountable for it. And if I am to answer, I must answer a question; the question is 'Why did you do

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it?' and in answering that question I give an account of my action."

Lucasian answerability is a three-place relation: X is answerable to Y for Z, where, typically, X and Y are agents or groups of agents, and Z is an action or set of actions. So Lucas needs to tell us (a) what counts (can count) as an action for which we are responsible — what the circumstances are in which the question can properly be asked at all; (b) what counts (can count) as an answer to the question "Why did you do it?"; and (c) who is entitled to ask the question anyway. Lucas's answer to (a) involves him in an Aristotelian account of voluntary action, and a recapitulation of his famous arguments for the freedom of the will (arguments which, incidentally, seem to me to have certain rather striking parallels with Aquinas's). His answer to (b) is an account of what a reason is. His answer to (c) gets him into the questions of political, social and economic philosophy which occupy his chapters 6–11. In Ch.12 he turns to questions to do with the nature of the Christian doctrine of the atonement, as understood in the light of his theory of responsibility. Thus Lucas's book is, in essence, structured round his answers to the questions I have identified as (a)–(c). In the rest of this review I will look at some points raised by his reply to (a).

Lucas's reply to (a) is that we are primarily answerable for our voluntary and free actions (positive responsibility), and secondarily for our voluntary and free omissions (negative responsibility). Lucas is suggesting, against the utilitarians, that there is a real distinction between actions and omissions. One interesting consequence of this distinction which Lucas notes is that, whereas I have positive responsibility for all my actions, it is only within a limited range that I have negative responsibility for what can be described as my omissions. There needs to be a special reason, founded perhaps on a relationship which I am in, for me to be negatively responsible for some omission of mine. By contrast, there needs to be a special reason for me *not* to be positively responsible for any action of mine. But how are we to distinguish actions and omissions? Lucas' (rather brief) answer is that "Actions are focused on some end result, and therefore not on others . . . in acting I necessarily narrow the focus of my concern" (p.38). To act at all, then, is to attend to what one is doing, one's action, and not to attend to what one is not doing, one's omission.

This suggestion will be criticised by utilitarians and other maximisers. For *which* action it is on which one should focus? Why (the maximiser will say) should we put up with Lucas's blinkered agents, who myopically attend only to the projects immediately in front of their noses, and look no further for the spin-offs and consequences? Why can't it be as it is on the maximiser's view: that all choices about how (not) to act should be focused on the *same* end-result, namely maximising overall utility, of whatever else it is that we want to maximise? In any case (the critic might add) more is needed to show that the actions/ omissions distinction, which has always looked suspect to consequentialist eyes, really does have something to do with the distinction between attending and not

attending with which Lucas links it. What, for example, about the squaddie who breathes as quietly and stands as still as possible when the sergeant asks for a volunteer? Isn't he attending to his omission and not attending to his action (for he does no action)?

These objections, however, can be met by Lucas. The first is sufficiently dealt with when Lucas points out that, as a matter of fact, no one normally does any such thing as focusing on the same end-result of "maximising the maximand" in all their practical choices. There is a huge difference between the utilitarian agent's psychology and actual human psychology — which is after all the only thing we can possibly have to work with in ethics. To that remark can be added another point: that the notion of "maximising the maximand" is in any case incapable of coherent formulation. (Although to many, me included, this point seems decisive against consequentialism, Lucas is less confident. "Since" — he writes — "we do, in fact, evaluate consequences in a rough and ready way, it is hard to maintain that they are in principle impossible to calculate" (p.35).)

As to the second point (about the squaddie) which I have suggested a consequentialist might make against Lucas, this point turns on a misunderstanding of the action/ omission doctrine (the claim that actions have a different moral status from omissions). Indeed this misunderstanding seems to me to be so pervasive in consequentialist thought that it will be worth a paragraph or so to try and deal with it.

The crucial thing is to keep clear about the differences between three distinctions: (i) positive actions vs. negative actions, (ii) actions vs. omissions, and (iii) the intended and foreseen consequences of an action vs. the foreseen but not intended consequences of an action vs. those consequences of an action which are neither foreseen nor intended. Many of the standard counter examples to the action/omission doctrine depend upon confusing these distinctions. For example Jonathan Bennett's well-known remark, that not warning John that he is about to walk over a cliff can be as effective a way of murdering him as any, gains its plausibility from this sort of confusion. For there is no action without an intention; so that the first question about Bennett's case is whether I kept silent *so that* John should walk over the cliff. If I did, then we do not have a case of an omission; we have a case of negative action. For an action (either negative or positive) is there when I intend to bring about some object, and do something (or do nothing as a special, limiting, case of doing something) *so that* that object will be achieved. Omissions however are neither positive nor negative actions. They are not actions at all, but failures to do actions *which* (and this is the crucial bit) *we might reasonably have been expected to do*.

For Bennett's case, the relevant omission nearest to hand is the one which may occur if it is true (1) that I keep silent and John walks over the cliff, but false (2) that I keep silent *so that* John will walk over the cliff. But even if we have (1) and the negation of (2), still we do not have an omission unless we also have what I have called "the crucial bit". The fact that (1) and the negation of (2) hold true of me does not constitute an

omission on my part unless I might reasonably have been expected to prevent John from walking over the cliff, as is not the case if (e.g.) I am being threatened with death if I make a sound by a man with a gun and a grudge against John, or if the cliff is in Scarborough and I am at the time in Buenos Aires. The point is that the notion of an omission is necessarily related to that of a responsibility to act. If I do not have some responsibility to act in a case, then there is no such thing as my omitting to act in that case. (Likewise, then, the sort of action to which omissions are opposed in my distinction (i) above is not just an action viewed in any sort of way, but an action viewed as something *for which I have responsibility*.) And here we are back at Lucas's very useful distinction between positive and negative responsibility.

Thus the question the consequentialist raised about the action/omission doctrine has become two questions. (a) How wide is the scope of our negative responsibilities? (b) How are we to make out the difference between negative and positive actions? The answer to (a) is that, since the consequentialist's attack on the action/omission distinction has been shown to be based on a web of mistakes, the onus is still on him to give a reason why we should believe, against our natural intuitions, that the scope of our (at least *prima facie*) negative responsibilities is as wide as he says it is. The answer to (b) is that the difference is one of degrees, the degrees in question being those which are to be found between, say, deliberately bringing the government down by armed insurrection and deliberately bringing it down by abstaining, in a No Confidence vote. But the element of deliberateness is to be stressed, for it is essential if we are to talk of these doings as actions, rather than omissions, at all. Within this sort of framework, it seems to me that Lucas's view about action and omission is entirely plausible.

Two minor criticisms before I close. First, besides suggesting, very convincingly, that we treat responsibility as answerability, Lucas also compares responsibility with Aristotle's *phronesis*. This suggestion is perhaps less felicitous, if, as Lucas observes, "Altogether responsibility lacks charm, lacks the human touch" (p.258). For *phronesis* does not share this lack; on the contrary, it is a necessary condition of charm (*eutrapelia*) or the human touch (*philia*) *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.6, 4.8, 6.13). In this way at least, then., Lucas's responsibility is not like Aristotle's *phronesis*. Second, Lucas cites the Adkins/Lloyd-Jones view that Homeric society was a society with little or no concept of responsibility. Personally I have always found this popular suggestion about Homeric society rather hard to understand. For there are at least two concepts central to Homeric society, viz. Resentment (*menis*, *Iliad* 1.1) and Revenge (*tisis*, *Iliad* 22.19), both of which presuppose a concept of responsibility. Strawson has shown how Resentment presupposes responsibility; and similarly, it follows from the meaning of "revenge" that, for example, Achilles could not (logically could not) have killed Aeneas rather than Hector in revenge for the death of Patroclus unless he wrongly thought that Aeneas had been responsible for Patroclus' death. For

Achilles to respond to Patroclus' death at Hector's hand by killing Aeneas would have been some kind of murder (senseless murder, perhaps), but it would not have been murder-in-revenge as killing Hector was. To describe it as (that sort of) revenge would merely be a misuse of language. Why so? Surely, because the Homeric notion of Revenge presupposes a Homeric notion of Responsibility.

But these are, as I say, minor criticisms, and overall the ambition, reasonableness, and scope of Lucas's thoroughly enjoyable book can only be admired. I warmly recommend it.

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**THE WISDOM OF FOOLS?** by Mary Grey. *SPCK*, 1993. pp. ix-164, £12.99.

For those interested in viewing reality from a specifically feminine angle any book by Mary Grey is a "must". The present book seeks to "see revelation in a context of mutuality, as divine communication, but for *our* times . . . as the dawning of a different consciousness, as a call to further participation in the divine work of creating and redeeming." The need to do so springs from the questions addressed to Christian revelation: How can it be understood in such a way as to bring God's justice to the victims of global oppression, and address the catastrophic situation of the planet?

The author believes that Christian revelation fails to do this because it is, and always has been, understood in the dialogical terms of what she styles the "logos myth". She attacks the whole philosophical basis of articulation and definition on which western civilisation has been built, and condemns it for spawning dualisms which have led to isolationist individualism, a hierarchical polity of power, nationalism and goals of materialistic success. She blames the same cause for creating an unjustified separation between God and human beings, between heaven and earth and for claiming that the revelation which bridges that gap can be captured in "timeless truths". She identifies this approach as characteristically, though not essentially, masculine, and opposes to it a "hermeneutic of connectedness", a psychological philosophy of "mutuality-in-relation" which seeks to apprehend reality by recognising connections rather than distinctions between different facets of experience. She diagnoses, of course, that such a disastrous situation has come about because of the almost total absence from the realms of power—theological, ecclesiastical and political—of the intuitive and more holistic feminine manner of articulating reality which seeks to discern and include, rather than sift and categorise, the significance of all experience.

The very structure of the book is intended to bring out this pervasive motif of connectedness. Chapters of reflective discussion and comment are strung on a weak story-line of *Perceval*, the holy fool, pursuing his quest for *Sophia*, the wisdom figure, through the modern world, too often frustrated by *Logos*, the successful politician or businessman. Part way