Interview with John Cottingham: Room for God in the Cartesian world-view

Truth and morality are central to the ideas of the Roman Catholic philosopher John Cottingham. Interview by Andrew Brown

EVERYBODY knows at least one joke about René Descartes, even if it is only the one about the philosopher who walks into a bar. “You’ll have the usual?” the barman asks. “I think not,” says Descartes, and vanishes.

Beyond the jokes, though, Descartes has become for certain writers a kind of shorthand for all that is wrong with the outlook of the modern, scientific age that style of inflexible rationalism — the left-brain thinking, as Iain McGilchrist would call it — that leads to a confidence that everything can be worked out clearly from first principles.

The Roman Catholic philosopher Professor John Cottingham has fought back against this interpretation of Descartes for decades. Where the conventional interpretation sees Descartes as one of the men who swept the universe clean before later thinkers could come along and throw out God with the rest of the medieval rubbish, Cottingham sees the thinker as deeply religious.

At a recent conference in honour of Don Cupitt, I was impressed by Professor Cottingham’s claim that Descartes shows we could not believe in objective reality and truth without some kind of trust in God as well.

His argument meshes well with evolutionary theory, although it was made 300 years before Darwin, because a willingness to lie and a capacity for self-deception are both very useful to social animals like ourselves, but a devotion to objective truth is, if anything, something of a handicap.

Boris Johnson has left uncountably more descendants than Simone Weil. It's hard to see how purely Darwinian mechanisms could account either for Weil herself or for our instinct to admire her. So I went to see Professor Cottingham at his home in Berkshire to talk some more.

"I see Descartes as a much more religious writer than most of my colleagues do," he said: "I think for Cupitt, the God element in Descartes is a sort of optional extra. The essential project for him is a self-generated one, but that's fundamentally at odds with the way Descartes thinks.

"Descartes says: 'From a great light in the intellect there follows a great affirmation in the will.'

"So, the picture there is that the intellect sees truths which are not of its making. Those truths constrain the assent. I don't make them true. I don't decide that they're true. On the contrary, as it were, I am following the light of truth.

"Our inquiries as human beings presuppose that, at some bedrock level, we are configured in such ways to respond to the truth. And I think without that assumption, yes, no coherent discourse would be possible."

HE SAYS that the Cartesian thinker meditating on the truth "could not even start to meditate unless there was an objective order of meaning and value which he or she is immediately in touch with. So, as soon I start to think, I'm aware of constraints on my thinking, both logical and moral, which are not of my making.

John Cottingham

“So, the Cartesian path from self to God and then to science is not really a self-constructed path, as is so often said. Rather, it is a journey of the mind towards an objective source of truth and of goodness, without which no coherent meditation would be possible in the first place.”

This interweaving of truth and morality is central to Professor Cottingham’s thought. Philosophy, he feels — and thinks — should always maintain contact with the human problems that animate it in the first place.

“A lot of the philosophy of religion that’s done in the analytic, Anglophone world is done at a very austere and abstract level. Arguments for and against existence of God, the very properties of God: omnipotence, omniscience. . . And so it’s very intricate, very — for those who are working on it — very interesting, but doesn’t actually make much contact with the spiritual life or with the religious quest.

“I’m after a sort of Wittgensteinian orientation, where, to understand the language, we need to understand the form of life in which it’s embedded. What I call ‘humane philosophy’ tries to be sensitive to the struggles of the individual as they wrestle with questions of the direction of their life — spiritual and moral questions; and by maintaining contact with that, I think one gets a richer, a more nuanced kind of philosophising.

“One analogy I draw is with music. You know, the way analytic philosophy of religion is practised is rather as if the philosophy of music was entirely to do with abstract theories of harmony or counterpoint, and never referred to the actual practising or experiencing of music and why it’s so precious in the lives of those who listen to it or make it.”

It was music, in fact, that drew him into the Roman Catholic Church. Brought up a conventional Anglican, in his fifties he started singing with his wife in the choir at Douai Abbey. “I became very dissatisfied with the highly secularised view of morals and ethics, [the view that] judgements about good, bad, right, or wrong, were just projections of our own tastes that was fashionable when I was an undergraduate, and subsequently even more so.

“One thing that moved me back towards a religious framework was that sense of moral demands as objective requirements that exert a call on us and — even when we turn away, as we often do — continue to have a kind of authority.

“So, that has become increasingly where I feel at home, both spiritually and philosophically, following the great tradition: Augustine, Aquinas, and even Descartes, though he’s frowned on by the Church as a problematic modern philosopher, but actually is, I think, patently, strongly influenced by the Thomistic tradition.”

“I certainly think that the cost/benefit approach to moral problems is just hopeless, in my view, hopelessly inadequate. Peter Singer’s *Practical*

Ethics has now become one of the most widely used textbooks for first-year moral philosophy. He's a good and very clear writer, but the idea that this can give you a neat, scientific answer to all the questions, perplexing issues, of moral philosophy is very, very worrying, really — very worrying.

"Moral demands have a sort of authoritative power. They exert a call on us. And that's not just something which could be fed into a calculus like the greatest happiness of the greatest number; it's something which essentially involves our being required to respond."

AT THIS point, I countered that the conclusions of a utilitarian calculus must feel objective and compelling from the inside. Somebody like Peter Singer will reach conclusions that they consider repugnant, but they must act on anyway.

Professor Cottingham responded: "It's true that once you accept the calculus, then it spews out a decision which is the thing to be done. But the kinds of moral imperative we feel, for example — to be compassionate, to help the afflicted, or to be loyal to our friends, or to devote enormous time and resources to our loved ones — those don't really ultimately apply for the utilitarian: they're simply fed into the calculus. And if that, if it dictates that the resource should go to *x* rather than *y*, then it doesn't really matter whether *x* is your duty.

"Bernard Williams once had that wonderful phrase: 'One thought too many' — that if they're on a sinking ship, and you can save only a certain number of people, and someone thinks, 'Well, I better save her, because she's my wife,' that would be one thought too many. It should just be done, as it were. The call should be felt directly, not as a result of calculation."

This is all part of his insistence that philosophy should help us to understand the world, and that we need all our faculties to do so, not just the analytical brain. He calls this project "humane philosophy", and his most recent book, *The Humane Perspective*, is a series of 14 linked essays around this theme.

“Descartes thought the self or soul was just a different kind of thing from the body, the measurable, quantitative stuff that comprises the body and indeed, the whole external world. I don’t buy that dualistic view.

“The problem about thinking of the soul as separate stuff, a separate spiritual entity, is that it doesn’t really explain anything. If you’re puzzled as to the mystery of consciousness, it’s not going to solve any puzzle to say, ‘Ah, that’s done by an incorporeal spirit.’ I mean, we’re none the wiser.

“The importance of the body is pretty clear in Christian tradition. For Aquinas, it’s important that your soul is an incomplete substance, so it always requires union with the body for its completion. Hence the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, not the survival of an incorporeal, Cartesian soul.

“So he, very much like Aristotle, thinks that the human being is, as it were, an integrated thing in its own right. And you can’t separate off the soul and think it could exist as a complete substance in its own right.”

What, then, were the souls in purgatory, I asked, since they could no longer have bodies. “When Descartes was asked this sort of question,” Professor Cottingham replied, “he always said, ‘Let us leave that for theologians.’”

Listen to an extended version of the interview on the Church Times *Podcast here*.

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