

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

WYCLIF

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THE description of Wyclif as a Master Mind, I have discovered, causes many an eyebrow to rise in incredulity. In earlier centuries there would have seemed nothing more natural than to single out Wyclif in this way. Two famous encomia may be cited in illustration. John Milton, urging the Parliament to innovative legislation on divorce, said this:

It would not be the first, or second time, since our ancient Druides left off their pagan rites, that England hath had this honour vouchsaft from Heav'n, to give out reformation to the World . . . Who but Alcuin and Wicklef our country men opened the eyes of Europe, the one in arts, the other in religion.

And in *Areopagitica*, arguing against prelatical censorship, Milton glories that out of England, as out of Sion, there were proclaimed and sounded forth the first tidings and trumpets of reformation to all Europe:

And had it not bin the obstinat perversnes of our Prelats against the divine and admirable spirit of Wicklef, to suppress him as a schismatic and innovator, perhaps neither the Bohemian Husse and Jerom, no nor the name of Luther, or of Calvin had bin ever known: the glory of reforming all our neighbours had bin completely ours.

In the nineteenth century, Wyclif was honoured not only in the vanguard of the reformers, but also as a pioneer of English literature. Ford Madox Brown, celebrating the flowering of the English language, matched his painting of Chaucer reading to the court of Edward III with a resplendent canvas of Wyclif reading his translation of the New Testament to John of Gaunt. Chaucer and Gower look on in admiration as Wyclif holds forth. Masterly indeed must be the mind of one who was both Morning Star of the Reformation and Founding Father of English Prose.

Wyclif's fame, however, rested on unstable foundations. The

attribution of the English bible was already questioned in the nineteenth century. Today the great majority of those who are in a position to judge believes that Wyclif had no more personal hand in the Wyclif bible than King James had in the King James bible. Equally, those who have studied most closely the surviving Wycliffite tracts hesitate to attribute any of them to the reformer himself. Indeed, they doubt whether anything in English survives from his hand save a few fragments.

Wyclif's reputation, therefore, must now rest on his Latin writings and these are not easy to evaluate. In general one must say that those who admire Wyclif have not read his works, and those who have read his works do not admire them. Let us quote, for instance, the words of Lane Poole, who edited Wyclif's main work of political theory, *De Civili Dominio*:

[Wyclif's] characteristics are what we expect in the age not only of *infima Latinitas*, but also of the extreme debasement of the scholastic method, when logic had ceased to act as a stimulus to the intellectual powers and had become a mere clog upon their exercise, and when men no longer framed syllogisms to develop their thoughts, but argued first and thought, if at all, afterwards (*Wyclif's Latin Works*, Wyclif Society, henceforth 'WS', 1885, p. 66).

The problem with Wyclif's Latin works is simple. In the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, few read, or understood, medieval scholastic philosophy outside a devoted band of Roman Catholic scholars. Those Protestants who admired Wyclif as a reformer neither understood nor cared about his philosophical system: scholasticism was part of the Romish darkness which the light of the Reformation had put to flight. Catholics who understood scholasticism paid little heed to Wyclif. Why study the texts of a worthless heretic when there were holy men of genius still awaiting editors?

If we are to reassess Wyclif we must take him from the Reformation pantheon, and replace him in his Oxford context. There he can be understood by comparison with other Oxford reformers.

In the remarkable but neglected book, *Enthusiasm*, Ronald Knox begins his life of Wesley thus:

The biography of John Wesley is surely unique. Here is a man born in the first decade of his century, who sees it through into the last; a man so far in reaction from the tendencies of his age that he seems a living commentary on them, yet so much the child of his age that you cannot think of him as fitting in with any other. A High Churchman in his youth, he makes for himself in the unsympathetic surroundings of

Oxford an enclave of primitive observance and of ascetic living; such is his personal influence that he seems destined, if that were possible, to shake Oxford out of its long dream. *Dis aliter visum*; he undergoes an experience of conversion before his lifetime has reached its mid-point. A sensational conversion; the finished product of the schools becomes the disciple of a foreign visitor to our shores, by no means his match in intellect. Thenceforward, he must fight by other methods, and for the most part with other companions, that battle against irreligion to which he has dedicated his youth. He has made his own soul, but the battle is not yet over; he finds himself in conflict with the men who had been his closest comrades in arms, and who still share his own beliefs but exaggerate their emphasis in a degree which he thinks dangerous. A man who once seemed likely to do great things for the Church of England, yet whose influence, on the whole, was to damage her position in the eyes of his contemporaries; a man, nevertheless, who lived to see something of the old bitterness against him die down, whose age was cheered by public recognition at once welcome, unsought, and unexpected.

So far, however, there is nothing unique about John Wesley. A careful reperusal of the foregoing paragraph will show that it all applied to the career of Cardinal Newman (p. 66).

Though Mgr Knox did not notice it, the common pattern which he traces between the lives of Wesley and Newman is a pattern which fits not only the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, but also the fourteenth: in each of the centuries the most important event in the religious history of Oxford was the defection of a favourite son from the religious establishment. To be sure, Wyclif did not live from the first to the last decade of the century; he was born in the twenties and died in the eighties of the fourteenth century. But like Wesley and Newman he was a fine flower of the Oxford schools, a man who stood out among his contemporaries for learning and austerity of life. Like them, he formed around himself a group of disciples, and seemed likely to dominate, by his personal influence and reputation, the course of the University's thought and practice. Like them, he took a doctrinal step which alienated his closest theological allies and vindicated the suspicions of his critics. Exiled from Oxford as they were exiled, he carried on his religious mission elsewhere, tireless in preaching, writing, and controversy, casting only a rare nostalgic glance at the distant spires of the home of his youth and promise.

Newman and Wesley, Knox tells us, were both in youth High Churchmen. The term, applied to Wyclif, would make no sense; but there is no doubt that in his youth Wyclif was a philosophical and theological conservative. In philosophy he defended the good

old cause of realism against the modernism of the nominalists. His enemies were philosophers such as Ockham who denied the reality of universals, stressed an empiricist theory of knowledge, and endeavoured to interpret metaphysical truths as truths of language. Before ever Wyclif appealed to the bible to overturn the doctrines of the Popes, he was reminding Oxford of its very earliest days when Grosseteste was its first chancellor, and he was appealing behind the scholastics of recent generations to the overarching authority of Augustine.

Mgr Ronald Knox applies to Wesley and Newman a description which would apply equally well to Wyclif: 'a man so far in reaction from the tendencies of his age that he seems a living commentary on them, yet so much the child of his age that you cannot think of him as fitting in with any other.' Wyclif stands out from later reformers by the profundity of his immersion in scholasticism; he stands out from other scholastics by his position at the break-up of the international academic scholastic community and the beginning of the separate vernacular cultures. In this way he is totally a man of one age: yet, like Wesley and Newman he continued to speak to generations yet unborn.

When he came to Oxford in the 1350s Oxford University had been for more than a century one of the great centres of European thought: it was just entering on a new period of comparative independence and isolation from its great sister university at Paris. The best known scholars of the generation before Wyclif, Duns Scotus and William Ockham, were both well known in Paris as well as in Oxford, and had lived long periods on the Continent; Wyclif remained in England except for a brief visit abroad. University lectures and sermons continued to be in Latin, and almost all Wyclif's unquestioned works were written in that tongue; but Oxford men now begin to write and preach in English too.

The story of Wyclif's life is soon told: his history is essentially a history of ideas. Though from time to time distracted by public service—at one time engaged on an embassy, at another offering an expert opinion to Parliament—he spent his life mainly in teaching, preaching, and writing. The history of his life is the list of the books he wrote and the tale of the reactions of his readers. Between 1360, when he was Master of Balliol, and 1372, when he took his DD, he produced a philosophical *summa* whose most important volume is a treatise on universals, designed to vindicate realism against the criticism of the nominalists. In his maturity he wrote a theological *summa* which began with two books of banal orthodoxy, moved through several of hardy innovation, passed

into overt heresy, and ended in barren polemic. The volumes of this work covered the whole range of medieval theology: three dealt with various forms of Law (*De Dominio Divino*, *De Mandatis Divinis*, and *De Civili Dominio*): this last proposed the controversial theses of the disendowment of evil clergy and the necessity of Christian communism. The *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* was a treatise of biblical criticism, hailed by later Protestants as an enunciation of the principle of *Scriptura sola*. In the *De Ecclesia*, *De Officio Regis*, and *De Potestate Papae* Wyclif analysed the structure of Christian church and society, castigated abuses, proposed reforms. In the *De Eucharistia* he discussed the Mass, the centre of medieval spirituality. The hardihood of his speculations here, and in subsequent works, led to the condemnation of his teaching by an Oxford University commission. He retired to his country living at Lutterworth and continued writing, in increasingly strident tones of polemic, until his death in 1384. Though various councils had condemned propositions taken from his work, he died himself at peace with the Church and his bones were allowed to rest—for a while—in consecrated ground.

In a lecture such as this there is not time for even the barest summary of Wyclif's thought. Instead, I shall try to illustrate the quality of his intellect by introducing three topics which are treated in his writings. The first will be drawn from philosophy, the second from natural theology, and the third from revealed, and in particular sacramental, theology. From philosophy I shall consider his argument in favour of universals against his nominalist adversaries. From natural theology I shall consider his treatment of the problem of freedom and necessity: one of considerable importance given his posthumous reputation as a thoroughgoing determinist. From sacramental theology I shall take, from his discussion of the Eucharist, his argument against the prevailing theory that in the sacrament the accidents remain without a substance.

First, then, realism and nominalism. Realism, for Wyclif, is above all a theory about the nature of universals; and the key to the understanding of universals is a grasp of the nature of predication. Everyone is familiar with the division of sentences into subject and predicate: in the sentence 'Banquo lives' 'Banquo' is the subject, and 'lives' is the predicate; so too 'dogs' is the subject and 'bark' the predicate in 'dogs bark', or so at least a medieval grammarian would have been likely to say. This distinction is a distinction between bits of language: we are talking about terms and sentences, not about anything which terms or sentences might

mean, or represent, or stand for. The word 'Banquo' is the subject of the sentence 'Banquo lives': it is a particular part of that sentence. But what about the man Banquo? Is he the subject of the sentence too? Well, if he is—and there are a number of idioms which make it natural to say so—he is not any part of the sentence in the way that the word 'Banquo' is. Banquo is the extra-linguistic item for which the word 'Banquo' stands; he is what the sentence 'Banquo lives' is about, but he is not anything which that sentence contains (as it contains the word 'Banquo').

Wyclif, like everybody else, recognizes as the most obvious form of predication that in which subject and predicate are linguistic items, parts of sentences. The first philosophical sense which he attributes to the verb '*predicare*' or 'predicate' is 'the predication of one term of another'. 'This', he says, 'is the sense much talked about by modern writers, who think that there is no other' (*De Universalibus*, ed. I. Mueller, trs. A. Kenny, henceforth 'U', i. 35). But in fact, he says, this kind of predication is modelled on a different kind of predication, real predication, which is 'being shared by or said of many things in common' (U, i. 33).

Real predication, then, is not a relationship between two terms, two bits of language. It is a relationship between the things in the world to which the linguistic items correspond. It is not the relationship between the subject-term 'Banquo' and the predicate-term 'lives', but the relationship between what the term 'Banquo' stands for, namely Banquo, and what it is in the world which corresponds to the term 'lives'. But what *is* the extra-mental entity which corresponds to 'lives'? Indeed *is* there anything in the world which corresponds to predicates? Wyclif's answer to the second question is that, if not, then there is no difference between true and false sentences. His answer to the first question is his theory of universals.

Wyclif believes that the correct understanding of predication as he explains it will enable us to accept the realist definition of universals rather than the nominalist one. The most popular examples of universals are genus and species: animal, for example, and man. The realist definition of 'genus' is brief and clear: 'Genus is what is predicated quidditatively of many things which differ in species.' The genus animal is not a word, or symbol, but a reality: it is what is common to each animal, and is what is predicated—really predicated—of each animal quidditatively. (Quidditative predication, as contrasted with qualitative predication, tells you what kind of thing something is, as opposed to what properties or qualities it has.) 'Not all modern logicians

gathered together' says Wyclif 'could improve a single word of the definition' (U, i. 350).

The modern logicians, or nominalists, since they do not accept real predication but only the predication of terms, are forced into terrible mazes when they try to define genus. They offer something like the following: a genus is a term or concept which is predicable (or whose counterpart is predicable) *per se* in the nominative quidditatively of many terms which signify things specifically distinct (U, i. 857-60).

For the realist, genus is an extra-linguistic reality; for the nominalist it is a term, an element of language, or a concept, an element of thought. The realist can say that genus is predicated, whereas the nominalist can only say it is predicable. Dogs are always animals, whether or not anyone is thinking or talking of animals; but it is only when someone is thinking or talking of animals that the *term* 'animal' is predicated. Moreover, if you take a single term such as the sound 'animal' produced by me at this moment—and if you are a nominalist keen to keep your ontology down to empirical particulars this is the only kind of thing you have a right to be talking about—then it is not true that it is even predicable of all animals. The sound would not last long enough to form part of all the different true sentences which would attribute animality to the various kinds of animal. That is why the nominalists have to add the rider 'or whose counterpart is predicable'. Now it is essential to genus that it should be related to different species; it is essential to a nominalist definition of genus that this relationship should be a relationship to different terms, not different extra-mental realities. But the nominalist cannot say that the term is predicated of terms differing in species; the word 'dog' does not differ in species from the word 'cat'. So the nominalist has to say that the terms signify things that are specifically distinct. But in doing so he checkmates himself: he is making specific difference something on the side of the things signified, not something belonging purely to the signs. But that is realism not nominalism (U, i. 355, 371).

For a consistent nominalist, Wyclif insists, substances do not resemble or differ in species, nor do they belong to any species; there cannot be any such thing as a species except as the product of a mind. But signs and thoughts are human creations; words and terms can change their meaning at their users' whim. If species therefore were signs or thoughts, we could change the species of anything simply by taking thought. 'Thus any thing could belong to the species of anything; a man could belong to the species of

donkey, simply through a change in the signification of terms' (U, i. 389-91).

Nominalism, according to Wyclif, is a ridiculous attempt to put the cart before the horse:

Neither the possibility nor the fact of assigning a term can cause extramental things to resemble each other more or less. The specific resemblance or difference between things is not the reason for the resemblance of extramental things; it is the other way round—in the first and principal place you have to look in the things themselves for the specific resemblances and differences, and only subsequently in the signs (U, i. 425-30).

The nominalist's attempt to give an account of meaning without universals collapses under its own weight, containing its own refutation.

Wyclif's realism is not a mere logical thesis, and his devotion to universals sometimes takes an almost mystical tone. Thus in answer to the objection that universals are superfluous unless they do something in the world, he replies:

It is clear, since universals regularly do what they ought to, that they do great service to their God, since he is Lord of them before he is Lord of individuals (U, xi. 230-2).

Moreover, Wyclif believes that error about the nature of universals leads to all kinds of moral error. Here he enlists the support of Augustine's *De Vera Religione*, chapter nine:

What everyone must principally love in his neighbour is that he is a human being, and not that he is his own son, or someone useful; for according to Augustine it is being a man which is what is common and is in an especial manner the work of God, since it precedes every particular human being, while being your son, or your mistress, is something you have brought about yourself (U, iii. 115-20).

Wyclif is prepared to go so far as to say that all actual sin is caused by the lack of an ordered love of universals: because sin consists in preferring lesser good to greater good and in general the more universal good is the greater good.

Thus if proprietors who are devoted to particulars were more concerned that a well-ordered commonwealth should thrive, than that their kinsfolk should prosper, or their relations or the people linked to them by locality or some other individuating condition, then beyond doubt they would not press, in the disordered way they do, for their own people to be raised to wealth, office, prelacy and other dignities (U, iii. 152-8).

In this passage we can see, in the young Wyclif, the logician linking hands with the reformer. Nominalism leads to selfishness, charity demands realism. 'Intellectual and emotional error about universals is the cause of all the sin that reigns in the world' (U, iii. 162-5). In the whole history of philosophy has realism ever had a more enthusiastic champion than Wyclif?

I turn to my second illustration: the relation between freedom and necessity. At the Council of Constance, after his death, Wyclif was condemned for holding that all things happen by absolute necessity, and he later had the reputation of being a crude determinist. In fact, at least in his youth, Wyclif developed a doctrine on this topic which was extremely subtle and nuanced. He distinguished between no less than eight different types of necessity, and he insisted that there were human actions which were free in the sense of being exempt from any of these eight types of necessity. (The eight types of necessity can be crudely catalogued as: logical necessity, natural necessity, eternal truth, sempiternal truth, inevitable truth, immutable truth, duress, and irresistible impulse.)

Wyclif puts his distinctions to work in dealing with the paradox of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. He puts to himself the following paralogism:

It is necessary that particular events come about by absolute necessity, for God necessarily and independently fore-ordains, foresees, and wills, by the will of his good pleasure, every particular creature. Nothing can resist his will, and so nothing can prevent any effect. Just as no one can prevent the world's having been, no one can prevent any effect coming to be at the appropriate time. For the following argument is valid: God ordains this; therefore this will necessarily come to pass at the appropriate time. The antecedent is outside any created power and is accordingly altogether unpreventable. Therefore, so is everything which formally follows from it (U, xiv. 294-305).

In the face of this objection, Wyclif reaffirms the crucial importance of human freedom: not just freedom from compulsion, but genuine freedom to choose between different alternatives:

Many effects are within rational creatures' free power between alternatives, in such a way that they can make them to be and make them not to be; otherwise merit and demerit would be eliminated (U, xiv. 322-7).

How are we to reconcile this with the divine control over human actions? Wyclif's proposed solution is that we should say that the relationship between the divine volition and the human action is

a two-way one: if God's volition causes man's act, so, in a sense, man's act causes God's volition. It is in the power of man to bring about, in respect of any of the eternal volitions in God, that none of them will be, and similarly with his non-volitions and vice versa:

On this it is to be noted that the volition of God, with respect to the existence of a creature, can be understood as a relationship, a mental entity with its basis in God's willing the thing to be according to its mental being—which is something absolutely necessary—and with its terminus in the existence of the creature in its own kind. And such a relationship depends on each of the terms, since if God is to will that Peter or some other creature should be it is requisite that it should in fact be. And thus the existence of the creature, even though it is temporal, causes in God an eternal mental relationship, which is always in process of being caused, and yet is always completely caused. Nor does it follow from this that God is changeable, since such a relationship is not the terminus of any change . . . nor does it follow from this that man can perfect God, or compel him, or cause in him volition, knowledge, or anything absolute (U, xiv. 328-44).

Thus, when God wills Peter to repent of his sin, it is true both to say that Peter is repenting because God wills him to repent, and that God wills him to repent because he is repenting. But God's eternal volition is a complex one, which includes other elements which in no way depend on Peter:

So the proposition 'God wills Peter to grieve' reports many volitions in God, for instance, the volition by which he wills to be what is absolutely necessary, the volition by which he wills the specific nature to be, and this depends on no particular man, and the volition by which it pleases God that Peter grieves, which is one that depends on Peter's grief (U, xiv. 346-52).

In this way the objection that if God's ordaining is outside our power, then all that follows from his ordaining is outside our power, is answered in a dramatic fashion. Wyclif simply denies the antecedent: God's ordaining is not outside our power. God's eternal volition, he says, 'is not completely caused before the termination of the effect, although it is determinately and non-disjunctively true'.

Does this mean, that when I prevent something happening I prevent God from willing? That would be absurd. 'When I prevent a creature I do not prevent God from willing, since according to his decree from all eternity he never willed the prevented creature so to act.' But it is true that this eternal willing of God's is something that I bring about (U, xiv. 386-99).

There is no necessary principle to the effect that if I can prevent an antecedent from coming to pass, I can prevent a consequent from coming to pass. What is true is rather that if the antecedent is something altogether outside my power, to bring about or bring about its contradictory, then anything logically following from it is equally firmly so.

Wyclif sums up the relations between necessity and contingency:

All future things will come to pass necessarily by hypothetical necessity, and yet will come to pass most contingently. Similarly, the truths which thus necessitate them came to pass necessarily, and yet it can be the case that they did not. Indeed you can make it be the case that they did not, and yet you cannot make them cease to be, nor can you make what has been begotten not have been begotten . . . All these and similar things are obvious from the infallible principle that with God all things which ever have been or will ever be are present, and thus, if something has been or will be, it is at the appropriate time. Blessed, then, be the Lord of time, who has lifted us above time to see that magnificent truth (U, xiv. 409-24).

We can see, then, how misleading it is to suggest that Wyclif went beyond contemporary theologians in limiting human freedom in the interests of divine omnipotence. On the contrary, he took the highly unusual step of safeguarding human freedom by extending its sphere of action to the eternal volitions of God himself.

It cannot be claimed that Wyclif's solution resolves the problem. When he distinguishes God's decrees into complex relational volitions, one simply wants to restate the objection in terms of the absolute mental volitions which are one element of the complex, an element which seems quite beyond human control. But no other medieval theologian succeeded in giving a satisfactory answer to the antinomy of divine power and human freedom, and perhaps no satisfactory answer will ever be possible. Where Wyclif departs from his colleagues is not in imputing extra necessity to human actions, but in assigning unusual contingency to divine volitions.

In theology Wyclif is best known for his attacks on the Papacy. But it was not Wyclif's views on the Papacy which led to his final breach with the teaching authority of the Church. It was when he turned his attention to the sacrament of the Eucharist, and gave an account of it which conflicted with the orthodox understanding of its nature, that he began to stand out in clear view as a heretic. When he denounced the Popes and questioned the validity of Papal claims he could find sympathizers even among the higher

clergy; when he called for the disendowment of the Church, many laymen and begging friars found his words congenial; but when he attacked the doctrine of transubstantiation, friars, noblemen, and bishops all turned against him, and the University which had hitherto sheltered him could no longer hold him. Events were to take a similar course nationally in the Reformation of the sixteenth century: bishops who went along with Henry VIII quite cheerfully when he threw off allegiance to the Pope and despoiled abbeys and priories were prepared, in the days of his son, to go to prison rather than accept any meddling with the Mass.

For most of his life, Wyclif accepted the traditional doctrine of the Eucharist; and he never ceased to venerate as a great sacrament the rite instituted by Jesus when at his last supper he took bread and said 'This is my body' and took wine and said 'This is my blood'. When, probably in 1379, Wyclif began to give the lectures which caused such a sensation, it was not the doctrine of the Real Presence that he was attacking, but the doctrine of transubstantiation as currently explained. The two doctrines are often confused by those unfamiliar with Catholic theology, but they must be carefully kept distinct by anyone who wishes to understand Wyclif. We may ask two questions about the Eucharist. First, do the words 'This is my body', uttered by Christ or his priest, make the body of Christ really, and not just symbolically, present? If you answer 'Yes' to that question, then you believe in the doctrine of the Real Presence. We may then go on to ask: what then happens to the bread? Is it still there? To accept the doctrine of transubstantiation you have to give a negative answer: it is no longer there; it has been turned into the body of Christ.

It was common to all the standard accounts of the Eucharist that the accidents remained without a substance; they were not accidents inhering in the bread, for the bread was no longer there; nor were they accidents of the body of Christ, otherwise that would be small and white and round like the sacramental host. It is this theory of accidents without a substance which Wyclif regarded as quintessentially absurd, and he devises argument after argument to bring out the absurdity:

To talk of accidents without a substance is self-contradictory. Every accident which formally inheres in a substance is nothing other than the truth that the substance is such-and-such in an accidental manner; but there cannot be such a truth without a substance, any more than there can be a creature without God; so there is no such thing as a heap of accidents without a subject which is the consecrated host (WS, 1892, 63).

Any whiteness must be the whiteness of something; but the whiteness of X is simply the truth that X is white; just as you cannot have a truth which is just the predicate '... is white' without a subject, so you cannot have an accident without a substance.

If you believe in the possibility of accidents without substance, Wyclif now argues, you have no reason to believe in the existence of material substances at all:

On this theory no intellect or sense proves the existence of any material substance; because no matter what sense experience or cognition is present it is possible and consistent that the whole created universe is just a ball of accidents; so someone who wishes to posit material objects must rely on the faith of Scripture (WS, 1892, 78).

Believers in transubstantiation, then, are reduced to a position of phenomenalism: the world may be nothing but experience, except where Scripture tells us the contrary. But Scripture does not even tell us of our own existence. No doubt each of us is self-conscious, but that does not tell us that we have a body as well as a soul; neither sense nor reason, if Wyclif's opponents are right, tell us we exist.

So of each of us it should be piously doubted whether he exists, and what he is. This would make it very difficult to examine the work of the clergy, to count the number of monks and to list the coins and gifts they have been given. Because each person could be a spirit linked to bare accidents, in which case he would not be the kind of man we know (WS, 1892, 79).

But this whole theory turns God into a deceiver. The theologians postulate the continuance of the accidents, so as to avoid having to say that the senses are deceived; but if there is no bread and wine there, then our inner judgement is even more grievously deceived:

Since the sense of men, both inner and outer, judge that what remains is bread and wine exactly like unconsecrated stuff, it seems that it is unworthy of the lord of truth to introduce such an illusion in his gracious giving of so worthy a gift (WS, 1892, 57).

The philosophical reader of Wyclif cannot help but be reminded of Descartes by these passages. Descartes, like the opponent Wyclif sets up, thinks that all the deliverances of inner and outer senses are, in themselves, compatible with the non-existence of the external world. Only the veracity of God convinces us of the reality of body as well as mind. And human beings, as conceived by Descartes, really are spirits linked to bare accidents; for the only matter which he recognizes is bare extension.

These points of Wyclif are well taken: but he goes further in trying to convict his adversaries of absurdity. Those who say that they see Christ in the sacrament should tell us whether he is standing or sitting, and tell us what colour and size he is in the different hosts: is he lighter in one and darker in another, big in one and small in another? Must not Christ move in six different ways at once when four priests carry the host to four points of the compass, one lifts it up and another puts it down? These questions are unfair taunts, because it was not part of Wyclif's opponents' theory that the accidents of the host inhered in the substance of Christ; it was precisely to avoid saying that the whiteness of the host was the whiteness of Christ that the theory of self-subsistent accidents was introduced. But, Wyclif says, if the link between Christ's body and the accidents of the host is broken, then how does the presence of the host on the altar effect the presence of Christ on the altar? For being in a place is accident just as much as being white or being round or being an inch in diameter.

Wyclif's philosophical arguments against transubstantiation are powerful. But he is equally opposed to the doctrine on theological grounds: it is an unscriptural innovation. St Thomas Aquinas may have taught it, though it is more charitable to suppose that his works were tampered with by evil friars after his death. But if he did teach it, it was a rash doctrine to teach, and quite unproved:

It is rash, because it sets out as an article of faith that neither bread nor wine remain after the consecration; which is excessively rash for many reasons; for it is an article which occurs in none of the three creeds of the church. What plausibility is there in saying that because of the rash assertion of one man the church is to be burdened with a new article of faith? (WS, 1892, 140).

Wyclif's own view is that the bread remains after the consecration; the visible and tangible accidents, after as before, are accidents of the bread. None the less, it does truly become the body of Christ, and Wyclif uses a number of illustrations to show how this can come about:

When writers write letters, words and sentences the paper and ink remain beneath the symbols. But through custom and skill those who can read pay much more attention to the significance of the symbols than to the natural characteristics of the signs to which an illiterate would attend. Much more so the habit of faith brings the faithful to grasp through the consecrated bread the true body of Christ (WS, 1892, 144).

The afterlife of Wyclif is as interesting as his life. When we turn to his influence after his death, the first topic to consider is bible translation. Clearly, whether or not he himself translated, he was anxious for the bible to be put into the vernacular. I quote an ancient translation of the *De Officio Pastoralis*:

The Holy Gost gaf to the apostles wit at Witsunday for to knowe al maner languages to teche the puple Goddes lawe therby; and so God wolde that the puple were taught Goddes lawe in diverse tungen; but what man on Goddes half shoulde reverse Goddes ordenaunce and his wille? And for this cause Seynt Jerom travelede and translated the Bible fro diverse tungs into Latyn that it myghte be after translated to othere tungen. And thus Crist and his apostles taughten the puple in that tunge that was most knowen to the puple; why shulden not man do so now? And herefore autors of the newe law, that weren apostles of Jesu Crist, writen their gospels in diverse tungen that weren more knowen to the puple. Also the worthy rewme of Fraunce, notwithstondyng all lettings hath translated the Bible and the Gospels with othere trewe sentences of doctours out of Latyn into Freynsch, why shulden not Englishe men do so? As lordes of Englonde han the Bible in Freynsch, so it were not agen resoun that they hadden the same sentence in Englishe; for thus Goddes law wold be bettere knowen and more trowed for onhed of wit, and more acord be betwixte rewnes (Ch. xv).

Did Wyclif himself put these precepts into practice? The early manuscripts of the English bible do not bear his name, and scholars nowadays are generally unconvinced that Wyclif wrote or even supervised the two versions of the English bible that have come down to us from this period,¹ though they were undoubtedly the work of men influenced and inspired by his teaching. In fact, the evidence for Wyclif's own responsibility for bible translation is not negligible. The chronicler Henry Knighton, not long after his death, wrote thus:

This master John Wyclif translated the gospel, which Christ had entrusted to clerks and to the doctors of this church so that they might minister it conveniently to the laity and to meaner people according to the needs of the time and the requirement of the listeners in their hunger of mind; and he translated it from Latin into the English, not the angelic, idiom (*in Anglicam linguam non angelicam*) so that by this means that which was formerly familiar to learned clerks and to those of good understanding has become common and open to the laity, and even to those women who know how to read,

¹ See, for instance, Anne Hudson, 'Wyclif and the English Language' in A. Kenny (ed.), *Wyclif in his Times* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 87 ff., from which the following quotation from Knighton is taken.

a state of affairs which Knighton regarded as shocking. Knighton was writing about 1392, only ten years after the events which he claims to record; and he was a canon of the Augustinian house of Leicester, where one of his colleagues was Philip Repton, one of Wyclif's closest disciples. So he was in a position to know what he was writing about. Later, Jan Hus was to report that the English said that Wyclif had translated the whole bible into English; and Archbishop Arundel, writing to Rome about his Constitutions of 1407 which forbade the making of new biblical versions, reported—in rather obscure language—that Wyclif had been responsible for making English versions of the sacred text.¹

Wyclif's relation to the Wycliffite bible is a topic on which I hesitate to express an opinion which goes against that of those who are much more qualified to judge than I am. It may be that there are linguistic arguments, drawn from the dialect and idiom of the versions, which make impossible the traditional ascription. This is a field in which I can only bow to those who are experts where I am ignorant. But so far as the purely historical argument runs, I must confess that it seems to me that it is as imprudent to assert that Wyclif had no hand in the bible as it is to assert that he was its sole or major author. The evidence of Knighton is the evidence of a man who was in a position to know, and who had no particular motive for inventing the story. It dates from less than a decade after the events it purports to record. Many events in Wyclif's life are reported by scholars without embarrassment on the basis of much less contemporary evidence. It seems to me easier to explain away the absence of Wyclif's name from the manuscripts where it does not appear than to explain its presence in those where it does: after all, during much of the lifetime of our manuscripts, it was a serious offence to possess or to read any Wyclif manuscript; and we know that Wyclif's Latin bible commentary survived in the Bodleian only because his name was expunged from the manuscript and remained hidden until it was revealed by ultra-violet light in 1953.² It has often been pointed out that in his few years at Lutterworth Wyclif could not have had time to write all the vernacular works attributed to him. But it seems to me equally implausible that a compulsive writer, driven from a place where Latin was the normal medium of communica-

¹ D. Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae and Hiberniae*, iii. 350 (cited in Hudson, op. cit., p. 105, n. 1).

² See B. Smalley, 'John Wyclif's *Postilla super totum Bibliam*', *Bodleian Library Quarterly*, iv (1953), 188.

tion to an arena where evangelism had to be in the vernacular, should have left it entirely to others to pursue this task.

What, next, of the influence of Wyclif's teaching? In England the Lollards, in Bohemia the Hussites kept green his memory. But what of the Universal Church of the fifteenth century? Here the matter was determined by the reaction of Christians to the Council of Constance.

During his lifetime Wyclif was never personally condemned as a heretic. A provincial synod at Blackfriars in 1382 had considered twenty-four propositions, concerning the Eucharist, the limits of clerical power, the dispensability of the Papacy, and the wrongness of clerical endowment. Ten of the propositions had been condemned as heretical and fourteen as erroneous; but Wyclif had not been condemned by name. His retirement and subsequent death allowed the official proceedings to rest. It was not in England but in Bohemia that, in the early years of the fifteenth century, the debate on his doctrines was most fierce. In 1403 the twenty-four Blackfriars propositions were condemned in Prague, and twenty-one new theses were added to them, making a list of forty-five errors. In 1409 Archbishop Arundel appointed a commission at Oxford to identify errors in Wyclif's works: they drew up a list of 267 suspect propositions for condemnation.

It was at the Council of Constance in 1415 that Wyclif's teaching was officially condemned by the Universal Church. The condemnation was delayed by nationalist rivalry. All wanted Wyclif condemned, but the German nation wanted the forty-five Prague propositions damned, while the English wanted the 267 Oxford theses condemned. It was not until the fifteenth session, the one memorable for the execution of Jan Hus, that Wyclif was condemned. First the forty-five propositions were proscribed; then 260 out of the 267. The 260 propositions were not read out in their entirety. The conciliar decree says that they had been examined, and it had been determined that some of them were notoriously heretical, and long condemned by the holy fathers; that some were blasphemous, others erroneous, others scandalous, some offensive to pious ears, and some rash and seditious. No attempt was made to attach theological notes to particular theses. Fifty-eight only were read out during the session. But all the articles were condemned. 'This sacred synod by an everlasting decree proscribes and condemns the aforesaid articles and any or each of them, forbidding each and every Catholic, under threat of anathema, to dare to preach, teach, put forward or maintain the said articles or any one of them.' Having condemned 305 Wycliffite propositions

the Council proceeded to deal with Hus: he was condemned, handed over to the secular arm, and burned that same day.¹

The condemnation of Hus has long been censured by Protestant writers as an example of cruel perfidy. But the condemnation of Wyclif, in the form it took, was itself outrageously unfair. Not that he was innocent of heresy, nor that a more careful judgement would have been unable to give a precise definition of the heresy. The point is that it was quite unjust to condemn, under a global anathema, propositions which many of the Council fathers themselves regarded as falling far short of heresy.

A good example of the influence which the Constance condemnations exercised on theology and philosophy can be seen in the university of Louvain during the half century after its foundation in 1425. Here, a quarrel between the faculties of theology and arts, concerning the implications of the condemnation of Wyclif's doctrine of necessity, led to the development of a system of three-valued logic, and the eventual prohibition of that system by the Pope in 1474.²

As the fifteenth century drew to its end, Wycliffite ideas seemed dead in all the major centres of learning in Christendom. But in the second decade of the sixteenth, as new heresies set Europe ablaze, many thought they could recognize in the new figure of Luther the familiar lineaments of Wyclif.

When Lutheran heresy came to England, it was regarded by the orthodox as a revival of Wyclif's teaching. King Henry VIII, in a letter to the Duke of Saxony, claimed that the errors of Luther were 'pure Wyclifism'. In controversy with Tyndale More describes Wyclif as 'the first founder of that abominable heresy, that blasphemeth the blessed sacrament' and complains that Tyndale regarded Wyclif as a Jonah sent to warn Nineveh of its sins.³

On the Continent as well as in England Wyclif was regarded, by friend and foe alike, as a precursor of the Reformation. At Worms an edition of the *Dialogus* appeared in 1525, the first of Wyclif's works to be printed and the only genuine one until the nineteenth century. In 1528 a Wycliffite commentary on the Apocalypse was printed at Wittenberg with a preface by Luther. On the Catholic side, Bartolomeo Guidiccio, writing to Paul III in 1538 to urge the summoning of a general council to anathematize the errors of the reformers, drew up a list of twenty Lutheran propositions. Nine of

¹ See A. Kenny, 'The Accursed Memory' in A. Kenny (ed.), *Wyclif in his Times*, 147-68.

² See L. Baudry, *La Querelle des Futurs Contingents* (Paris, 1965).

³ *Complete Works of Sir Thomas More*, viii (New Haven, 1963), 587.

these, he claimed, were old errors of Wyclif already condemned at the Council of Constance. But the Wycliffite propositions condemned at Constance had begun a new life of their own. A Protestant admirer published a set of 'aphorisms of John Wyclif'. They were none other than the condemned articles.

When the Council of Trent met to codify the Catholic position against the heresies of the Reformation, the anathemas laid upon Wyclif were frequently cited, especially in the Eucharistic session of 1547. One year later, on the Protestant side, John Bale, in his catalogue of British writers published at Basel, hailed Wyclif as 'the most strong Elias of his times' and wrote that 'he shone like the morning star in the midst of a cloud, and remained for many days as the faithful witness in the church'. John Foxe, in a Latin Protestant martyrology published at Strasbourg in 1554, gave Wyclif and his followers pride of place among the victims of tyrannical Roman persecution. This martyrology, after Foxe's return to England, grew into the *Acts and Monuments* which forever canonized Wyclif's role as the great English precursor of the Reformation.¹

Many English Catholic writers set out to refute Foxe. In Elizabeth's reign the most tireless critic of Wyclif was Nicholas Harpsfield, Archdeacon of Canterbury in the days of Pole. In one of the dialogues he wrote in 1566, he says that Wyclif is an uncomfortable ally for the reformers: Wyclif approved of the worship of relics and images, for instance. Luther, he says, regarded Wyclif as a heretic; and he quotes Melanchthon, writing about the Lord's supper:

I have looked at Wyclif, who makes a great stir on this issue, but I have found in him many other errors, which permit one to judge of his spirit. He did not understand or maintain justification by faith. He naively mixes up politics with the gospel, and did not realise that the gospel allows us to accept the lawful regimes of all nations. He claims that priests are not allowed to possess any private property, and thinks that tithes should be paid only to teachers . . .²

Setting Wyclif against the more recent reformers became a standard move of Counter-Reformation apologetic.

Foxe, in later editions of his *Book of Martyrs* replied to some of the taunts of 'Cope', and some fifteen years later Harpsfield returned to the charge. In captivity he wrote a lengthy history of

¹ See M. Aston, 'John Wycliffe's Reformation Reputation', *Past and Present*, xxx (1965), 21-31.

² N. Harpsfield, *Dialogi Sex . . . ab Alano Copo* (Antwerp, 1566).

the English church: to it he added a long appendix, a *Historia Wicleffiana*, a history of English heresy to match the history of English piety.¹

The history combines a chauvinistic pride in the extent of Wyclif's influence (a single Englishman filling the whole world with his ideas) with a horror at the wickedness of his heresy (no decent Englishman believed a word of Wyclif's teaching until the present pestiferous generation). Readers will find, he says, that Luther borrowed not only his abuse of the Roman church, but all his heresies, from Wyclif—except that on the issue of the Eucharist Wyclif is even worse than Luther. He matches Lutheran heresies against the articles condemned at the Council of Constance. But the latter-day disciples of Wyclif, he insists, disagree with their master about image-worship, celibacy, and pacifism.

Better known than Harpsfield was the Jesuit, Robert Persons, who drew on his work in his own *Treatise of Three Conversions of England* in 1603. His book was an elaborate reply to Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* and his annotated copy can still be seen in the English College in Rome. Persons mocks at the calendar of Protestant martyrs in which Foxe places Wyclif at the head, as martyr of the day for 2 January. Wyclif was no martyr, but died in his bed; and many of the doctrines he held would make a good Protestant blush. To be sure, Foxe had admitted that 'in John Wickliffe's opinions and assertions some blemishes perhaps may be noted: yet such blemishes they be, which rather declare him to be a man that might erre, than which directly did fight against Christ our Savior'. But this is not enough for Persons. Is it all right then, to fight indirectly against Christ? It is evident, Persons says, from the articles alleged by Foxe that Wyclif held many points of the Catholic religion now disowned by Protestants, such as holy orders, consecration, excommunication, distinction of venial and mortal sins, and the like. He concludes, sweepingly 'Wickliffe, Husse, and other like sectarys did hold many more articles with us against the protestants, than with them against us' (op. cit., 1, 486).

One of Persons's most interesting critics was Thomas James, the first librarian of the Bodleian Library, who in 1608 wrote *An Apologie for John Wickliffe, showing his conformitie with the now Church of England*. He took as his target both ill-informed Protestants and ill-willing Papists. He announced that his intention was to reply to Wyclif's critics 'out of his own words and works as they are extant in sundray old manuscripts in our so renowned public library'.

¹ *Historia Anglicanae Ecclesiae* (Douai, 1622).

He takes the reader through a series of topics of Reformation controversy: the authority of Scripture, the role of vernacular translations, the authority of tradition, the claims of the Papacy, justification by faith, the doctrine of the Eucharist. He has little difficulty in showing that on most of these issues Wyclif's position was closer to that of the Church of England than to that of the Church of Rome. Scripture, for Wyclif, contains all that is necessary for a Christian, and should be available in the vernacular; tradition is subservient to Scripture, and the Pope's power is limited, and Popes should not meddle with the affairs of princes. The Church of Rome may err. 'Wickliffe remains, in this point, as in all the former, a resolved, true Catholike English Protestant' (op. cit., 2, 10, 145, 23).

What, then, finally, is the importance of Wyclif in an age of ecumenical theology and analytical philosophy? We can answer this question by returning to the paradox from which we began and the ambiguities which we have discovered. Wyclif, we said, was read by few of those who admired him, and admired by few of those who had read him. Those who revered him as a reformer were repelled by his scholasticism, and those who could stomach his scholasticism were disgusted by his heresy. During the Reformation period neither Catholic nor Protestant could, in good conscience, claim him as an unambiguous ally.

But here lies the secret of Wyclif's contemporary interest. Persons and James were both indeed correct in claiming that Wyclif contained much that supported their own side in the Reformation debate. Precisely because he is a thinker who anticipated many Reformation insights while firmly enframed within the Catholic tradition, his writings have much to offer those who seek to combine the positive elements of both traditions while discarding the negative and divisive elements. It is true that his later works strike an unhelpful note of polemic, though he never, at his worst, descends to the level of the fishwife Latin in which Luther and More tangled with each other. But in his major writings, up to and including the *De Potestate Papae* and the *De Eucharistia*, there is much that can speak to the contemporary heirs both of the Church of England within which he worked and of the Roman church which he tried to reform.

It could not be claimed that his political writings, in this century, have anything to offer to anyone but the historian. No doubt if he were to return to earth Wyclif would be surprised to find that of all his ideas it was communism which had, in the long term, found the greatest echo—though communism arrived

at by reasoning very different from his own, and imposed by methods very different from his.

I, for my part, am neither a theologian nor a political theorist but a philosopher: and I will end by saying why I find Wyclif's philosophy a particularly exciting treasure house of ideas at the present time. It is only in recent decades, for the very first time since the Council of Constance, that it has become possible to read Wyclif with an unblinkered philosophical eye. This has come about because of the secularization of scholasticism.

Up to the time of the Second Vatican Council scholastic philosophy was above all the confessional philosophy of the Roman Catholic church; all Catholic institutions of higher learning were obliged to teach scholasticism, and hardly anyone not a Roman Catholic took any serious interest in the study of it. Thus Wyclif's philosophical writings were a closed book, eschewed by non-Catholics because of their scholasticism, and abhorred by Catholics because of the heresy into which their author fell.

In the last few decades, all that has changed. Since the Second Vatican Council Roman Catholic philosophers have become eclectic, and Roman Catholic theology is interpreted into thought systems very different from those of medieval scholasticism. Compensatingly, scholars of other religions and of no religion have begun to take a purely philosophical interest in medieval thinkers; not just in great theologians like Aquinas and Scotus, but also humbler logicians such as William of Sherwood and Walter Burleigh. The linguistic turn which Anglo-American philosophy has taken in the present century has made it easier to enter into the writings of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century semanticists whose philosophy, like current analytic philosophy, attached an overwhelming importance to the logical analysis of the forms of ordinary language. For the first time, then, philosophers today are in a position to read Wyclif's philosophy unfettered by confessional prejudice, and unhindered by lack of comprehension of scholastic questions and answers.

Wyclif was the last of the major scholastics. No later pre-Reformation writer has a comparable breadth of vision or sharpness of dialectical talent. To read him is an excitement because of the way in which he combines virtuosity in scholastic method, and indeed a conservative scholastic metaphysic, with a set of emphases and concerns which are manifestly continuous with those of the modern world of the Renaissance and the Reformation. It is still too early to make a considered judgement on his standing in the overall history of philosophy: his own works have

not yet been sufficiently studied, nor are those of his predecessors sufficiently well known, for us to take the measure of the profundity and originality of his mind. But it may well be that when the scholarly accounts can at length be cast Wyclif will be seen to rank with Scotus and Ockham as a worthy member of a great Oxford triumvirate. As the light dies from the Morning Star of the Reformation, that of the Evening Star of Scholasticism may glow brighter and brighter.