

First letter from Arthur to Mary Prior, 29 April, 1945¹

Letter 131²

Sun 29/4/45
NZ 421486
ACI Prior (N.V)
No. 5 Squadron
NZAPO 361.

Darling da,

On the last two pages of my last I gave, I think, a fairly clear account of the connection between Fatalism and Defiance, & the logic of Ahab's alternations between pride & despair. There is another connection to be added on the despair weighted side of the vicious circle. Defiance of fate, & attempts to circumvent a known or imagined destiny, may themselves be fates means of bringing about the end feared. You get that in Montaigne's³ story about the contemporary French nobleman who feared he would be on the loosing side, & so went over to the enemy, & the side he was on to begin with won the day after all (& then Montaigne quotes the bit from Horace about the gods laughing at us). It is brought out still better in the Eastern story of the appointment in Samara. It is also brought out to some extent in another Eastern story that I saw in a Readers' Digest. Some king or chieftain going through the desert met the Spirit of the Plague, who said he was going to Baghdad to slay 5000 people. Later on he met the spirit again & reproached him because he had slain 30.000 in Baghdad instead of [2] 5.000. "No", said the Plague, "I only slew 5000. The other were slain by Fear."

I think Ahab has a haunting suspicion that he may be being diddled; & of course he is being diddled, by the instrumentality of Fedallah's ambiguous prophecies; as the biblical Ahab was being diddled by his false prophets, who, as Micaiah said quite plainly, were just being used by God to cause Ahab himself to fulfil His own already declared intention of killing him & having his flesh eaten by the dogs. I hope, by the way, that I remembered to bring that bit into my account of the parallels between Melville's Ahab & the Biblical one.

After re-reading your draft instalment I've been turning up those notes of mine for my Scottish book, particularly those for the section which would have dealt with the distinction between "Fatalism" and "Necessity" (to use Melville's terminology) – Vol. III, Ch. II, §3. "The Freedom of God". One suggestion at least which arises from the notes is worth passing on to you – before you take those two little volumes of Witherspoon⁴ back to the library, read what he has to say on the subject. He was at Princeton a few decades after Edwards⁵; & one of those two volumes contains the lectures on Divinity that he delivered there. They are quite short – as short a "System [3] of Divinity" as I've come across - & readable; he has a particularly

¹ Editors' note: This letter has been edited by David Jakobsen. It is part of the Ann Prior Collection, kept at The Bodleian Library in Oxford, box 12.558-4, folder 3, April, item 130. The letter is written on standard writing paper from 'National Patriotic Fund Board for New Zealand'.

² Editor's note: Arthur Prior has numbered these letters and uses the numbers for reference.

³ Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a French philosopher and is, together with Melville mentioned in many of Arthur's letters to Mary during 1945.

⁴ John Witherspoon (1723-1794) Scottish American Presbyterian who was president of Princeton University from 1768 – 1794. He is mentioned in several letters from Arthur to Mary in 1945.

⁵ Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) American theologian and philosopher whose views on predestination constitutes the backdrop of Ahab's struggles with Fate in Melville's Moby Dick. As a young man Prior considered himself a disciple of Jonathan Edwards, but he later came to reject his view on foreknowledge and predestination.

good, clear, simple, sensible 18th century style. He was not a disciple of Edwards, but a shrewd, cultivated, traditional Calvinist, & while I don't know that he mentions Edwards, he discusses necessity, & speaks of a "Beltistian"⁶ scheme which I think most people today would associate with the name of Leibnitz⁷. Witherspoon doesn't think God is really honored by attempts to prove that "all is for the best in his best of all possible worlds. The main relevant heading in his table of contents is that on the decrees of God, he uses the table to find out what bits are worth reading. He is really first rate at briefly & clearly stating various positions & what is to be said for & against them. – His pretty persistent non-reference to Edwards is a little remarkable; & I would hazard a guess that Edwards's writings were often profoundly distasteful to him, but he did not wish to say all he felt about an honoured predecessor. He advised his students to learn French & read French theological writings, both Calvinist & Jansenist; & I have the impression that that was something that Edwards didn't do. Edwards's lack of reference to his predecessors among theologians – to the great Reformers & Protestant schoolmen – is as notable as Witherspoon's lack of reference to Edwards. [4] Edwards seemed to be much more of a philosopher than a theologian, & was in some ways a very typical "modernist" & indeed a very typical American. He just didn't know his own place in the history of theology, & I'm pretty sure he didn't care, & that place is as a matter of fact a very curious one. I'm pretty sure he didn't think of himself as a "modernist", or even as a "moderate" Calvinist; but his theory of the means by which God controls our wills was essentially that of John Cameron⁸, who was considered a very dangerous "moderate" in his day (& at this point⁹ my own feelings are with his opponents). But more than that, Edward's doctrine was foreshadowed in the 17th century by the Jesuits, & opposed at that date, as a denial of predestination (which was conceived more like Melville's "Fatalism"), not only by the Calvinists but also by the R.C. Jansenists & Dominicans. Edwards's "modernism", his detachment from tradition, was of course quite "Jesuitical" too. The Jesuit order had about the same relation to traditional Catholicism in the 16th & 17th centuries, as National Socialism has had in our own day to German conservative nationalism; & there were Catholics (e.g. Pascal) who felt about the Jesuits as people like Rauschnig¹⁰ feel about Hitler. The Jesuits were authoritarian but not traditionalist; believes in power [5] but not in law. Witherspoon was deeply influenced by Pascal; Edwards was certainly not influenced by the Jesuits, but was rather like them in being very little influenced by anyone. It is characteristic of people of this type to throw up theories that are not at all original, & that have perhaps long ago been condemned by the tradition in which they imagine they are standing. The Jesuit who foreshadowed Edwards's theory of the will was a Spaniard named Molina¹¹; the view later adopted by the Arminians, or at least some of them; in Hill's Lectures on Divinity it is discussed as "Arminianism" rather than as "Molinism" (though he later congratulates Edwards on his defense of Calvinism¹²!). Molinism is condemned in the Westminster Confession, Ch. III, §II, "Although God knows whatever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions; yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions." The Molinists held that man is free in the sense that he is left to make his own decisions, at least on such subjects as the acceptance or rejection of Christianity; but that God knows just how any given free agent will act under given conditions, so He leaves these "free agents" to themselves, but places them under the conditions in which

⁶ Editors' note: The word comes from what is called Beltistian Theory is Leibniz idea that God out of all possible worlds must actualize that which is best.

⁷ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716).

⁸ John Cameron (1579-1625) Scottish theologian whose views on the free will Prior argued had influenced Jonathan Edwards.

⁹ Written in the margin: "i.e. his theory about the will"

¹⁰ Hermann Adolf Reinhold Rauschnig (1887-1982) was a German Conservative reactionary who briefly was a member of the Nazi movement.

¹¹ Luis de Molina (1535 – 1600) who invented the theory known as Molinism that God's knowledge of counterfactual of creaturely freedom is not a part of his knowledge of necessary truths, nor a part of the knowledge truths decided by his will, but constitutes knowledge of what free creatures would do in various possible circumstances.

¹² Written in the margin: "i.e. he praises in Edwards the view which he condemns in the Molinist-Arminians."

they will choose to act as He wants them to do. [6] The resemblance between this & Edwards's conception of "moral necessity" is too obvious to need elaboration; though Hill seems to have been misled (a) by the physical dissimilarity between the word "motives" (which he likes) & the word "conditions" (which he doesn't like); & (b) by the fact that Molinism was commonly discussed in a different context from Edwards's necessitarianism – a context which by the 18th century seemed a little unreal & antique; they didn't think of it then as a living theory, close even to their own minds (Adam Gib¹³ was an exception here – he was quick to detect Molinism in the necessitarianism, not of Edwards, but of his Scottish contemporary Lord Kames). Molinism involved a particular conception of the divine omniscience, & it was around this conception that controversy mostly centred in the 17th century. The Dominican (Thomists), Jansenists, & most Calvinists (there were exceptions before Edwards – I'll mention them later) held that God's knowledge is of two kinds – first, "knowledge of vision" (*scientia visionis*), that is, a knowledge of abstract logical laws, & of the distinction between good & evil, & other such timeless things, & in general of the conditions which a concept must fulfil in order to be "possible", & so of all possible things & happenings; & secondly, a knowledge of which of these possibilities are going to be realized, which, second knowledge boils down to God's knowledge of what He Himself has decided to do. [7] (I've forgotten the name given to this second kind of divine knowledge – it's in *Principal Hill*, Vol. III, near the beginning – you'll see in the table of contents a summary of some section in which words like "*scientia visionis*" appear). This was a sort of generally accepted compromise solution of the problem whether God's knowledge precedes His will (His decision) or vice versa. His "knowledge of vision" precedes His decision – His decision must be logical & good – but His other knowledge, being a knowledge of what He has Himself decided, follows it. The Molinists & the Arminians were led by their theory of free will to posit a third kind of knowledge in God, and "intermediate" knowledge or "*scientia media*"; a knowledge which I always find a little hard to distinguish from his "*scientia visionis*", and which Edwards, I fancy, failed to distinguish from it at all. This "*scientia media*" or "*scientia conditionata*" is a knowledge of what will happen if such-&-such another thing happens – e.g. of what would follow if A decided to do B, or what A would decide if confronted by the event B. It is a knowledge not of logical principles but of causal connections, on the basis of which God performs the kind of juggleries with circumstances which the Molinist theory of the will demands.*¹⁴ Old 17th century Latin [8] books about Predestination like Rutherford's "*De Providentia Dei*" & Strang's "*De Voluntate Dei circa Peccatum*" always have a chapter or two on this "*scientia media*", & of course Turretin¹⁵ has a go at it in the appropriate place in his big system. I remember reading in Rutherford's¹⁶ "*De Providentia*" an objection to the "*scientia media*" theory on the ground that our final hope & trust is no longer reposed upon God alone, but upon God plus the various causal necessities which He perceives but cannot alter by His "*scientia media*".

I'll continue this in my next. In the meantime it is worth noting that the theory which Melville makes so much use of is a Jesuit theory (it depicts a rather Jesuitical deity too), which slipped into New England Protestantism largely, I should say, through the latter's relative isolation from Europe & European judgments.

Heaps & heaps of love

¹³ Adam Gib (1714-1788) Scottish theologian and studied by Prior as part of his work on Scottish Theology. The Prior archive, box 7, at Oxford University contains a notebook scared by a fire on Adam Gibs theology.

¹⁴ In the margin: "And this knowledge involves a "foreseeing" of what God has not Himself decreed. That was the big aim of Molinists & Arminians – to reduce predestination to foreknowledge. The "*scientia visionis*" is not a foreknowledge.

¹⁵ Francis Turretin (1623-1687) part of the reformed Scholasticism which Prior studied for his history of Scottish Theology.

¹⁶ Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) was a Scottish Reformed pastor whose work is discussed by Prior in *Faith, Unbelief and Evil: a fragment of a dialogue* (2012) *Synthese*, Vol. 188, No. 3 From a Logical Angle, pp. 381-397.

- Pigslop

Kisses to Three-tooth