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The Cross of Wisdom: Ambiguities in  
Turning Down Apologetics (Paul, Anselm,  
Barth)

Anthony Feneuil

There is more than one fool in the Bible, and I would like to start with another fool than Paul's, but whose legacy in the history of theology (and philosophy) has been equally significant. I want to talk about the fool from Psalms 14 and 53, who dares to say in his heart: "There is no God." How is the foolishness of this fool (*nabal*), called in Latin *insipiens*, and in Greek ἄφρων, related to the foolishness of God (μωρία, in Latin *stultitia*) in Paul's epistle? It would certainly be interesting to compare philologically μωρία and ἄφρων, and to determine what version of the psalm Paul could have been reading,

in order to guess whether he intended to distinguish the two kinds of foolishness. Unfortunately, I would be unable to do this, so I will stick to the concepts. Is it possible to articulate those two kinds of foolishness? The foolishness of the atheist and the foolishness of God?

One should at least notice their association in a major theological treatise: Anselm's *Proslogion*. At the end of chapter 3, devoted to show that it is "impossible for God not to be," Anselm goes on to ask: "Why then did 'the Fool said in his heart, there is no God' . . . when it is so evident to any rational mind that You of all things exist to the highest degree? Why indeed, unless because he was stupid and a fool [*stultus et insipiens*]?"<sup>1</sup> Anselm's gesture of identifying the *stultus* and the *insipiens* could be considered anti-Paulinian. To say the least, it gives a very modest interpretation of the distinction between divine and human wisdoms. The foolishness of the *insipiens* indeed seems to equate the weakness of his understanding with the fact that he did not realize that one cannot logically deny God's existence. Hence, the necessity to address him rationally in order to convince him of his own foolishness. Human foolishness is but a lesser divine wisdom, a wisdom of the same kind. And the foolishness of God is a folly only to an imperfect human wisdom. Therefore, the proper theological task would be to improve human wisdom, in order to grant it access to the wisdom of God.

Today, who would defend such a reading of Paul? Apologetics is not very popular among theologians anymore. Only a few of them would assert that unbelief is merely irrational. Arguments for the existence of God are, rather, studied for the sake of history. Hence, the theological mainstream would probably tend to interpret more radically the distinction between the two kinds of wisdom, as a distinction between two incommensurable realms. The wisdom

1. Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 88.

of God would not only seem foolish to a fake human wisdom, but would actually be a folly to *any* human wisdom as such. And the foolishness of human wisdom would not be the result of any weakness of understanding, but would name more truly *this* wisdom. With this kind of reading, one could then appeal to Paul in order to turn down any apologetic attempt as misleading. Why would someone use natural reason to know God and convince the fools, if natural reason is, as such, a folly contrary to divine wisdom?

I will not engage directly the question of whether this reading of Paul is correct. I would like to stress only its great ambiguity. This ambiguity is made clear by the fact that this antiapologetic reading of Paul often appears in apologetic contexts, as a last barricade for faith against rational strikes. It is the case, for instance, in William Alston's 1991 book *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, where the author aims at defending the rationality of cognitive claims based on what he calls perceptions of God. At some point, he investigates psychological theories that, roughly, pretend to reduce those kinds of perceptions to pathological hallucinations, in particular psychoanalysis. After having stressed internal weaknesses in Freud's theories, he finally engages in a surprising argument:

But for the sake of argument let's take Freud seriously and see what follows. . . . Why suppose that this is not the mechanism God uses to reveal Himself to our experience? Because it seems very odd that God would choose such a means? But much of what happens in the world seems to us to be not the sort of things the Christian God would choose. Hence the problem of evil, and hence the paradoxicality of the cross (to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness).<sup>2</sup>

So here is a strong advocate of apologetics who, when facing what could be an overwhelming counterargument, were it based on solid

2. William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 233.

grounds, eventually appeals to Paul and the “paradoxicality of the cross” in order to defend himself. It is as if the apologist could always, even with a bad hand, play a last joker or, rather, put a gun on the table and declare the end of all usual rules in the name of the superior rationality for which he is advocating and that is ungraspable by purely human minds. This strategy is not a new one. Here is what Blaise Pascal wrote in what was meant to be an apology of Christianity: “Who then will condemn Christians for being unable to give rational grounds for their belief, professing as they do a religion for which they cannot give rational grounds? They declare that it is a folly, *stultitiam*, in expounding it to the world, and then you complain that they do not prove it. If they did prove it they would not be keeping their word. It is by being without proof that they show they are not without sense.”<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, those are not Pascal’s final words on the topic. Even though he often insists on the irrational *origin* of many Christian dogmas, he also stresses how rationally powerful they are to explain the human condition.<sup>4</sup> To find the denial of apologetics as a truly final kind of apologetics, without any compromise with rationality, one has to look at Montaigne:

. . . they think we give them very fair play in putting them into the liberty of combatting our religion with weapons merely human, whom, in her majesty, full of authority and command, they durst not attack. The means that I shall use, and that I think most proper to subdue this frenzy, is to crush and spurn under foot pride and human arrogance; to make them sensible of the inanity, vanity, and vileness of man; to

3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 122 (no. 418/233, “the wager”).

4. See *ibid.*, 219 (no. 695/445): “Original sin is folly in the eyes of men, but it is put forward as such. You should therefore not reproach me for the unreasonable. But this folly is wiser than all men’s wisdom, *it is wiser than men*. For without it, what are we to say man is? His whole state depends on this imperceptible point. How could he have become aware of it through his reason, seeing that it is something contrary to reason and that his reason, far from discovering it by its own methods, draws away when presented with it?”

wrest the wretched arms of their reason out of their hands; to make them bow down and bite the ground under the authority and reverence of the Divine Majesty. 'Tis to that alone that knowledge and wisdom appertain . . .'<sup>5</sup>

Montaigne then paraphrases Paul to summarize his thesis: “our wisdom is but folly in the sight of God.” One could have said as well, on Karl Barth’s humorous tone: “God is everything, man is nothing, and thou art a madman.”<sup>6</sup> It is in Montaigne indeed that the ambiguity of this apologetic/antiapologetic use of Paul’s epistle is altogether uncovered. Although it appears as an assumption of God’s foolishness, it may only be one more *mondaine philosophie*. Montaigne’s commitment to Christianity is a highly problematic question among scholars. The question is to determine whether his fideism is only a disguised atheism or the true expression of his irrational commitment to Christianity. This question is more than an anecdotal one. It shows that there is a structural analogy, and even a complete reversibility, between fideism and skepticism. And this reversibility does not mean that fideism should always be considered as a religious form of *rational* criticism: either a final religious attempt to resist the progress of rationalism, or the first intrusion of rationalism inside the religious sphere, a concealed atheism. Quentin Meillassoux has shown that fideism could be understood the other way around, as skepticism’s truth. Not, then, as a religious form of a general process of rationalization but, rather, as the first figure of a shift *within rationality itself*, a shift toward what Meillassoux calls the “*religionizing* [*enreligement*] of reason,”<sup>7</sup> which he identifies as a

5. Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton (London: Reeves and Turner, 1877), 150–51.

6. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 259.

7. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 47.

distinctive feature of modern (and postmodern) thought: “Once the absolute has become unthinkable, even atheism, which also targets God’s inexistence in the manner of an absolute, is reduced to a mere belief, and hence to a religion, albeit of the nihilist kind. Faith is pitched against faith, since what determines our fundamental choices cannot be rationally proved.”<sup>8</sup>

The modern tendency to deny reason’s ability to grasp the absolute would entail an a priori justification of any belief, *insofar as it does not pretend to be rationally justified*. Therefore, it is no longer the folly of God which is wiser than human wisdom, but any folly as such. It is likely that today one would probably find it more reasonable to declare oneself an atheist (or a Christian, or an Hindu) on the ground of one’s cultural environment or intimate conviction, and to ask for tolerance, than to try to demonstrate that no God exists, or that Hinduism is true. According to Meillassoux, this situation has very concrete consequences: “. . . if nothing absolute is thinkable, there is no reason why the worst forms of violence could not claim to have been sanctioned by a transcendence that is only accessible to the elect few.”<sup>9</sup>

So what? Paul, the founder of universalism, according to Alain Badiou (because the foolishness of what he proclaims shows that the universality of a belief depends more on the way it is believed than on its rational content), could also be, and for the exact same reason, the model for contemporary fanaticism?<sup>10</sup> Would his word of the cross

8. *Ibid.*, 46.

9. *Ibid.*, 47.

10. Badiou’s reading of Paul prevents any “terrorist” interpretation of that kind. As a matter of fact, Badiou—who wrote a preface for Meillassoux’s book—makes strong assertions against relativism, and claims that he has overcome this aspect of postmodernity. According to him, no folly is as such a true proposition, but only insofar as it demands a new kind of subjectivity and, in this regard, becomes universal. Nevertheless, one could easily argue that his reading of Paul is exemplary of what Meillassoux is trying to point at, namely the fact that piety in regard to belief (one’s attitude toward one’s beliefs, in this case the fact that one is willing to become an *absolute* subject, a “subject without identity” serving the event one is proclaiming) is more important

express, rather than Christian revelation, the wisdom of the world itself?

Whatever the answer may be, the question itself shows that any appeal to the foolishness of God in order to disqualify apologetics is somewhat suspicious. It looks like what Karl Barth calls “tax-collector pharisaism,”<sup>11</sup> that is, a reversed pride, the overly self-confident claim of one’s own weakness, grounded on the belief that one can reach salvation by oneself—not by fulfilling the commands of the law (as a Pharisee), but by *not* fulfilling them (as the tax collector). Does this entail that we Christians should just give up on claiming for ourselves the foolishness of God and engage in natural theology? Should we build new arguments for the existence of God and improve the old ones? This seems to be what Meillassoux calls us to, from his materialist point of view: to choose Anselm (and Descartes) rather than Paul (and Kant, and Derrida).

Before that, it may be wise to look further into what Anselm actually does—we might find something quite different than in Descartes, and not so foreign to Paul. Otherwise, would Barth, a notably Paulinian theologian whose refusal of natural theology is famous, have written a whole volume on Anselm, one that he himself considered one of his most significant books? He may have seen

for its truth than its intrinsic rationality (objectivity). In one of his articles (“History and Event in Alain Badiou,” trans. T. Nail, *Parrhesia* 12 [2011]: 1–11), Meillassoux acknowledges the religious (eschatological) dimension of Badiou’s thought. The whole question is to determine if Meillassoux is right in thinking that the modern antirealist trend of thought bears in itself irrationality and a potential communitarian violence, or if there is something as an immanent rationality of this trend of thought, immanent to piety, so to speak, able to replace the first-hand irrationality of the content and to prevent relativism without negating the subjective aspect of all knowledge altogether. This second position seems closer to what Badiou holds. Paul precisely allows him to show how extreme “piety” (in Meillassoux’s vocabulary) entails an attempt to universalize its content and, therefore, something like a regulation of the “faith against faith” violence.

11. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark, 1956), 617, and already *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 109.



in Anselm a way to escape the ambiguities of too sharp a denial of apologetics, *without* giving up Paul's summon against worldly wisdom.

According to Barth, Anselm's proof is not natural theology. Anselm never places himself on the—supposedly common to the believer and the unbeliever—ground of natural reason. The definition of God Anselm gives at the beginning of the *Proslogion* is not, says Barth, a definition in the strict sense of the term but, rather, a confession of faith. It does not define the nature of God but acknowledges a divine command, actually the first of the Ten Commandments (“You shall have no other gods before me”): “We believe that You are something than which nothing greater can be thought.”<sup>12</sup> It is not about the abstract essence of God, but about the relation of lordliness between the revealed God and God's creatures. Anselm does not place himself on the fool's ground, he does not think on the same level. And the proof does not primarily prove the existence of God but, rather, the fact that, on the ground of this lordliness relationship that God initiated, it is not even possible for us to imagine, even as a mere hypothesis, the inexistence of God. The mere hypothesis of the nonexistence does not fit God. In that respect as well, God is very different from any other object of the world (very different from a hundred-euro note, for instance). Therefore, Anselm's proof is not an ontological proof, that is, a proof that would go from God's essence in thought to God's actual existence. It is not a proof in which human thought is above God, in which human thought decides about God's existence. It is the other way around: the proof aims at showing, from the revealed name of God, that human thought cannot establish itself as a spectator above God. The proof shows that human thought, in relation to God, is unescapably limited.

12. Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, 87.

Therefore, one could say that, in a sense, the proof aims precisely at negating the possibility of any natural theology, understood as a human attempt to escape the relation of obedience to God, and to establish oneself in the position of being able to make judgments about God's existence, just as about the existence of any object. It is a proof that declares our wisdom as a folly before God. Hence, the *insipiens*, in Barth's reading of Anselm—that is, the one who does not understand the proof—is not only the one who *denies* the existence of God, but also the one who tries to *establish* this existence on purely rational grounds. Who, then, is the *insipiens*? He is Descartes, not less than Kant, because when Descartes attempts to ground the certainty of God's existence exclusively on human reason, he believes that he can consider God as a thought object similar to others, whose existence can always be put into bracket. Insofar, he is an *insipiens*: he believes that one can talk about God as about a thing or an absent person, using a third-person discourse, whereas one cannot talk about God without talking *to* God. Consequently, there is no fundamental difference between Anselm's *insipiens* and Paul's fool: both refer to those who do not acknowledge the foolishness of their own wisdom, but neither Anselm's *incipiens* nor Paul's fool refer to the one who cannot reason well, for any contingent cause.

But at the same time, and this is just as important, Anselm is actually stating a *proof* aimed at convincing the *insipiens*. In other words, the fact that natural theology is impossible and that, theologically speaking, the initiative belongs to no one but God, before whom human creatures have only to listen and pray, is revealed through the mask of that fact's opposite. But it is actually very sound: if only God can limit our arguments about God—if, in other words, it is the foolishness *of God*, and of God only, that is actually wiser than human beings—then reason alone cannot discover

its own limits. Therefore, when human thought does discover its own boundaries—for instance, at the occasion of a *Critique of Pure Reason*—far from actually pointing to its own limits, it overcomes them again:<sup>13</sup> “God is hidden, not because of the relativity of all human knowledge, but because he is the living God who reveals himself as he is, the triune God, inexhaustibly living, immutably the subject, from himself and not from us. It is not a much too skeptical philosophy that makes him the hidden God.”<sup>14</sup>

Theologically, it is thus necessary that the boundaries of human reason appear through a *proof*, in which human reason seems to overcome itself—and actually overcomes itself, as long as God does not himself bind it. It is necessary, in order for human foolishness to be revealed in the greatest human wisdom (“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”; 1 Cor. 1:20). That is why Barth asserts that between theological truth and theological error, between the boastful philosophical folly and the humble theological wisdom, there is nothing but “the merest hair’s breadth.”<sup>15</sup> The merest hair’s breadth, that is to say, no difference at all, *from the human point of view*. In other words, the true limitation of reason, the only limitation that is not a self-limitation, cannot reveal itself but through the features of an unbounded reason—Hegel’s reason rather than Kant’s.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it is just as foolish to deny apologetics in an absolute

13. This is probably the core of Hegel’s critique of Kant’s notion of “*Grenze*” in the first book of the *Science of Logic*, ch. 2, section B.1: “*Grenze*.” The bound cannot appear as such but from the outside.

14. Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:135.

15. Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, trans. I. W. Robertson (New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 70.

16. A very good insight into the closeness of Barth’s notion of reason to Hegel’s, in its relation to the concept of boundaries and to Anselm’s proof, is given by Sigurd Bark in his doctoral dissertation, “Seeking Out the Enemy on His Own Ground: Problems and Proof in Dialectical Theology,” PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 2013.

manner as it is to engage in apologetics on purely rational ground, through a bracketing of faith.

1. It is foolish to deny apologetics, that is, the full rationality of faith, because one could only do that by denying God the privilege to limit human reason. Any human denial of the apologetics project could not be but the erection of *human* foolishness where *divine* foolishness should be. One could only do that by rejecting revelation as such, as the foolishness of *God*. Human rationality would probably be overcome if the kingdom of God were a present reality, but it is not. Until it is, we cannot give up rationality. We have to bear rationality as our cross, so to speak. Hence, there is no way, as a theologian, to reject the arguments of the fool (of the materialist thinker, the atheist, and the like) on the ground that faith is irreducible to reason. The theologian has to answer those arguments. She cannot live in a separate sphere, outside the intellectual and philosophical life. She has to engage into contemporary intellectual debates.
2. This apologetic dimension of theology does not contradict its revealed nature. Quite the opposite: it is only through faith that rationality can become our cross. We can go further: the *insipiens* herself is a faith character. She is a character that prevents the believer from reducing the gap between faith and anything given. She is then a character that forces faith to relentlessly refine itself. She is a theological insider. That is precisely why the *insipiens* is not, in Anselm, an empirical character (someone Anselm might have met), even less a political character (the contemporaneity of Anselm to the crusades, stressed by Franz Overbeck, is misleading). The *insipiens* is a *biblical* character. The *insipiens* reminds us that the foolishness of God is not *our* foolishness but the foolishness of the cross, that is, the foolishness

of the God who unveils Godself through God's own veiling, and so God's foolishness is nothing which the historical church could possess or which could be used to end the conversation with the world and within the church itself as it struggles to make its own proclamation clearer. In that sense, apologetics is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking intelligence, and not a theological incursion into enemy territory (as if the enemy was not always already inside theology).

Consequently, Barth's turning down of apologetics is very different from any postmodern attitude of withdrawal into one's own beliefs. It is true that, ultimately, there is no difference in Barth between apologetics and dogmatics ("the best apologetics is good dogmatics"). True also that dogmatics cannot be but *church* dogmatics, and that the theologian cannot talk but from the church and to the church. But that does not mean that it withdraws inside the sacristy. On the contrary, this means that the theologian is always already exposed to unbelief, because she is herself, as a human being, fundamentally an unbeliever. She is turned toward the inside, but the doors and the windows are wide open. The *insipiens* is a faith character, she comes from faith itself, and for this reason the theologian has to listen to her. Without the patronizing attitude of the one who knows better and whose only uncertainty is about the choice of pedagogical means to impose her own conviction, but with the consciousness of having no decisive vantage point and the hope that adverse arguments will allow her to better understand herself, "Thinking, albeit differently from him, the believer time and time again finds himself in human solidarity with the *insipiens*, whose objection serves to remind the believer of his own task, and he cannot refuse to make his answer."<sup>17</sup>

Would I dare to go further into exegesis, I would say that this

17. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 106.

conception of apologetics as a dialogue with the *insipiens*, not in a spirit of defense or conquest, but as theology's proper task toward itself, is a somewhat Paulinian conception. The question of foolishness comes back later in the epistle, when Paul talks about this mysterious "speaking in a tongue" (1 Cor. 14:22-23). Paul does grant this phenomenon spiritual value, but the way in which he tries to regulate its use is meaningful. On the one hand, he claims that this "speaking in a tongue," of which we know at least that it is not directly understandable, is a sign that should be directed toward the outside. This means the vanity of any apologetic attempt, as long as it is conceived as what Barth calls parliamentary apologetics,<sup>18</sup> in which the theologian is seen as leaving her chair to get down on the battlefield with a white flag in order to discuss peace with the unbeliever and never putting her own position into question. But on the other hand, Paul urges one not to speak in tongues during the assemblies of believers, where one should, rather, tell prophecies, that is, speak in an intelligible way. It is quite difficult to see precisely what this means, and how it fits the Corinthian context of the time. But the interesting thing for us is the justification Paul gives to this assertion: unbelievers that would join those assemblies (where Christians would be speaking in a tongue) would "think you are mad" (1 Cor. 14:23), and that could prevent them from converting to the faith. This is to say, the  $\mu\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ , the foolishness of God, cannot be merely identified with human irrationality. This also means that the unbeliever, as the outsider *inside* the church (it is only when the unbeliever is among the believers that Paul recommends speaking rationally rather than irrationally), is somewhat the witness of the difference between those two kinds of irrationality. The unbeliever summons the church from the inside and reminds it that it has no choice but to be part of the

18. Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Schleiermachers: Vorlesung Göttingen, Wintersemester 1923/1924*, ed. D. Ritschl (Zürich: TVZ, 1978), 438.

wisdom of the world, and that it cannot escape this wisdom without trying to escape the foolishness of *God*.

Ultimately, the *insipiens* reminds the church of its own unbelief, and she prevents it from boasting in its own foolishness. The *insipiens* warns the church that what it believes to be the foolishness of God might be a human, all-too-human, madness, a wisdom of the second order. The *insipiens* calls the church, from within, to rationality, and insofar she is the reason to do theology. We have to answer her, but at the same time we cannot, as theologians, answer her but from the standpoint of faith, that is, from a standpoint where we cannot stand. And there lies the foolishness of the church of Christ: it is not its last wall against the strikes of the *insipiens*, but the risk it takes out of solidarity with the unbelievers, its openness to the wisdoms of the world, *as an act of faith*. The foolishness of God is not the *sacrificium intellectus*—this would be too easy. It might be, so to speak, the sacrifice of the *sacrificium intellectus* or, even better, the renouncing of the sacrifice, in the name of the sacrifice of the cross that relieves us of having to sacrifice. The *insipiens* reminds us that the foolishness of God is also a stumbling block. A stumbling block to the Jews, sure, but just as we are all Greeks, since we are all foolish, especially when we believe we are Christians, we Christians are all Jews, because we are always prone to rest in the law, that is, in the church in its historical shape.

Here is the foolishness and the stumbling block: that Truth may be revealed to us through what the *insipiens* says about it. But then, how could theology be more than a “*mondaine philosophie*”? Barth identifies two signs in Anselm’s writings, two visible signs that tend to distinguish those writings from philosophical writings: Anselm’s concern for the beauty (*pulchritudo*) of his arguments, and Anselm’s humor, which Barth often contrasts with Gaunilo’s tragic tone.<sup>19</sup> Just

as the foolishness cannot be considered independently from the fact that it is a stumbling block, beauty and humor are to be understood jointly. Beauty, which makes the apologetic argument a liturgical act, needs humor not to be satisfied in the contemplation of itself. But humor—without humor no theology would be possible, since the tragedy of its impossibility would reduce us to silence, and we cannot speak as long as we take seriously the unbelief of the unbeliever as well as our own unbelief—the humor that specifies theology, needs beauty not to sink into ironic detachment. Scholars often stress the beauty in Paul’s letters. What about his humor? That might be, one more time, the fools, the wise men *par excellence*, those Athenian philosophers before whom Paul proclaimed the resurrection of the dead (Acts 17), who reveal, against their will, the human truth of his discourse: they laughed at him. . . .

19. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 15–16 (*pulchritudo*), and 71 (humor).