

Prologue

As sheep to a good shepherd, the Lord has given to man
intellections of this present world.

Evagrius of Pontus
Texts on Discrimination, #16 (EGP 1, 48)

Thoughts, like sheep, given the chance, are prone to wander aimlessly. Sheep follow one another, without any necessary sense of direction or purpose. They are often found gathered together in flocks, but each individual creature presents its own image of vulnerability and individuality. They get lost, and become sick or lame or hungry. But they can also be shepherded, thus gaining direction, and may be cared for, fed, and protected. A good shepherd will search out the lost, feed the hungry and care for the sick.

Such an image, particularly for those familiar with rural life, offers countless metaphorical and parabolic possibilities. Thus, most famously in the Christian tradition, Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheep of his pasture.¹ Evagrius of Pontus (345/346-399), however, suggests that we are all shepherds and that God has given us thoughts – or here “intellections” – as sheep to be cared for.

It is a much neglected, and somewhat disconcerting, facet of the extended metaphor of sheep and shepherd, at least in relation to the New Testament of Christian scripture, that the sheep are, at the end of the day, there for the shepherd, or for the one whom the shepherd serves, and not primarily the other way around. In ancient times, as now, sheep were kept for their wool and lambs for meat. Then, although less commonly now, lambs were killed for sacrifice. Unless they are the victims of sickness, or of marauding wolves, sheep and lambs are eventually put to death. Perhaps this reality

betrays an intended irony when the Jesus of John's gospel expresses his willingness to lay down his life for his sheep? However, returning to the metaphor of thoughts as sheep that human beings shepherd in their minds, can we say that these sheep are there for the benefit of those who think them, or for those whom the thinker serves, rather than for their own sake?

The answer to this question will depend upon theology and philosophy for it could well be argued, amongst other things, that the thoughts are simply there for no purpose or that they are there for the benefit of those who think them, or that they are ultimately there for the glory of God. Perhaps it is a little more helpful, however, to ask what the purpose might be of shepherding these thoughts? Surely most people shepherd their thoughts with a purpose in mind? That purpose might be to serve their own advantage, or to serve the benefit of others, or to serve God, or perhaps it might be for some other purpose. However, the fact is that we do shepherd our thoughts and that we perceive ourselves as doing so for a reason. No matter how much they wander randomly, become sick, follow the wrong leader, or otherwise misbehave, it is a feature of the inner life of human beings that we do keep trying to shepherd our thoughts in particular ways with particular purposes in mind. The writing and the reading of this text are but one example of this amongst an infinite number of possible examples that could be taken from the thoughts that humans have, whether communicated in speech or writing or remaining secret within our own minds and souls.

Furthermore, the shepherding of thoughts is something which we perceive as uniquely and characteristically human and as deeply intimate. To talk about the ways in which we shepherd thoughts within our own inner space is to talk about something which gets to the heart of what it means to be human and also – at the individual level – to the heart of what it means to be “me”. Thoughts are very personal and yet, because they wander like sheep, going to places to which we perhaps wish they hadn't gone, we may be ashamed of them and not want other people to know about them. Undoubtedly most of us, most of the time, only share with others those thoughts that we feel pleased with, or at least which are not embarrassing. We talk about the ones that are shepherded in ways that we think others will approve of, but not about the ones that get lost, or the ones that we took to prohibited places. Our conversation about the shepherding of our thoughts, if not the actual business of

shepherding, is strongly determined by a sense of what is socially acceptable.

In a post-Freudian world, we are aware that much of what we “think” is unconscious and that the unconscious world – of which we are generally not explicitly aware, but about which we are generally uneasy – has characteristic ways of making itself felt: in dreams, in slips of the tongue, in humour and so on. Indeed, so familiar are we now with this concept that we feel less ashamed than we used to of confessing thoughts that Freud has led us to believe we need not be ashamed about. Or, at least, we are less ashamed of some such thoughts some of the time, for we now seem to spend much more time in western society talking about sex, but much less time talking about death, for example.

Applying this Freudian knowledge to our metaphor of thoughts as sheep and ourselves as shepherds, we might say that we don’t always know where our sheep have gone, but we are often vaguely aware that there are some missing. Or else we might be more ready to admit pasturing sheep in some places than in others. But, still, the process of tending this flock is very important to us and we spend much – if not all – of our waking life giving it our attention.

Where, then, does this extended metaphor take us?

It is used here primarily for two reasons. Firstly, it facilitates an introduction to talking about why our inner world is important to us as human beings and yet why we also often do not speak about it. Secondly, however, the quotation with which it began is taken from one of the earlier contributions to a collection of texts known as the *Philokalia* – an anthology of spiritual writings from the Eastern Christian tradition, spanning the fourth to the fifteenth centuries C.E.

Philokalia means literally “love of the beautiful”, but is usually understood in Greek as referring to an anthology of works.² Today, reference to the *Philokalia* is usually taken, unless specified otherwise, to denote a particular anthology assembled by two Greek monks in the eighteenth century, which was first published in Venice in 1782.³ The compilers, Nikodimos of Mount Athos (1749-1809) and Makarios of Corinth (1731-1805) apparently chose their texts with a view to making more widely available that which would be helpful in the spiritual life, drawn from the hesychastic tradition. This tradition, broadly understood, seeks to find an inner stillness of the soul – away from the distractions of thoughts and desires – within which contemplation of God might be undertaken and,

eventually, union with God found. In other words, it is a tradition of Christian prayer which emphasises attention to the inner life, the life of thoughts, with a view to the purpose of contemplating God himself. To quote from another contributor to the *Philokalia*, Maximos the Confessor, and following the same metaphor used by Evagrius, within this tradition: ‘sheep represent thoughts pastured by the intellect on the mountains of contemplation’.⁴

The intention here, then, is to explore the ways in which this collection of texts might help with the process of shepherding thoughts or, to be less allegorical, the ways in which the tradition expressed within this collection of texts might assist in developing a Christian understanding of the inner life of thoughts and of nurturing mental well-being. Necessarily, this exploration does not confine itself to the inner life – the *Philokalia* talks of virtue in Christian living and not only of thoughts and desires. However, it does emphasise the life of prayer as the only basis on which Christians can properly understand the inner life or conceive of mental well-being. It thus assumes from the outset that the central, primary and underlying purpose for which Christians will properly and beneficially shepherd their thoughts is that of loving, serving and worshipping God. It also assumes that the shepherding of thoughts for other purposes – such as human happiness as an end in itself – will always be more or less unsatisfactory. However, whilst these are fairly major assumptions, which atheist shepherds of thoughts such as Freud would undoubtedly disagree with, it is not intended that they should hide this exploration away from a critical encounter with other shepherds and other traditions. On the contrary, such encounters are exactly what is intended here.

These assumptions do recognise, however, that complete objectivity is not attainable, either in the inner life or in academic discourse. An observer must occupy a particular position in order to observe and an awareness of the subjectivity of the space which one occupies is, it is contended here, not a weakness but rather a strength. There may, then, be other reasons for my use of the metaphor of sheep and shepherd as an introduction to this work. In fact, perhaps there is a necessity – rather than merely the possibility – of other reasons for my beginning in this way. If I approach this work from an academic perspective, I must also necessarily approach it as an exploration of my own inner world from within the Christian tradition to which I belong. This will surely reveal that there must be other reasons for

my choice of this particular metaphor – reasons which are either concerned with my own conscious sense of vocation to be a shepherd of thoughts, or else perhaps my own unconscious thoughts around this theme (the “sheep” that I am only vaguely aware have “gone missing” from the fold of my consciousness). Perhaps – as I hope – these reasons concern my sense of purpose in combining a vocation to the priesthood with a training in clinical psychiatry and academic study, all of which seem to me to have this theme in common. Or perhaps – although I consciously deny it – they concern an attempt to find connections where there are none, to cover up the aimlessness of the mental wandering of my own thoughts like lost sheep. The point is not so much that either of these reasons is necessarily correct as that there are various possible reasons which are more concerned with the subjectivity of my vocation to write than the actual purpose of writing this particular text for others to read.

This subjectivity of writing is not eliminable from this text, but neither is it entirely unhelpful. Because of it, I approach the *Philokalia* with a view to being challenged by its discourse as to the ways in which my own thoughts may better be shepherded. If I do not allow the texts of the *Philokalia* to challenge me in this and other ways, as I also myself challenge them with a spirit of critical academic enquiry, the encounter is false. Indeed, to talk about a subject such as this and to remain entirely unaffected, or to avoid altogether any examination of its impact upon the understanding of one’s own thoughts, would seem rather dishonest. This is, after all, itself primarily an attempt to shepherd thoughts for a particular purpose – that of understanding better how the inner life may be understood and developed. Although the circularity of this process might seem to some to be undermining of objectivity, it is the reality of the process in which the compilers and authors of the *Philokalia* themselves engaged and in which they invite us to join them. Whilst I will not be uncritical of these fellow authors, I trust that I will show enough respect to take seriously what they have said to me.

I have wondered (my thoughts wandering like lost sheep perhaps?) what other metaphors might have been used to introduce this subject. As much of the writing was undertaken on Holy Island, in Northumberland, I looked across the beach and saw rocks scattered across the sea shore like sheep scattered across a pasture. I considered my own walks across these beaches and the way in which one’s attention is divided between an intended destination

across the beach and the immediate task of finding a firm footing for one's next step. It is easy to go astray from the former goal because of the necessity of the latter task. Rocks on the beach, like thoughts in the mind, are necessary as a basis for moving forward, but can easily also lead away from the place to which one intended to travel. But the need to find a firm footing does not invalidate the destination or refute the evidence of the eyes. It speaks only to human limitation.

Do such images assist in the examination of a subject which, since Freud, has become the subject of a vast and diverse technical literature? The possible answers to that question will be left for later consideration, but an unprejudiced examination of a pre-Freudian and pre-modern literature and the wisdom that it contains cannot avoid examining the possibility that they do assist in reaching a final destination; whereas, perhaps, the more technical tools of our contemporary academic discourse may confine themselves more to finding the next rock on which to stand.

The writers of the *Philokalia* sought a final destination by means of taking individual steps with care. To the best of my ability I have sought to follow that example in my writing on this subject. This book may therefore be considered as comprising six steps towards the goal of understanding what the *Philokalia* has to tell us about mental well-being and the shepherding of thoughts. These steps are:

1. In Chapter One I give consideration to influences that have helped to shape the writing of the *Philokalia*, its compilation, its teachings on the inner life of thoughts, and the foundations upon which it has been built. I do not feel that the teaching of the *Philokalia* on the inner life can be properly appreciated without this contextual information.
2. In Chapter Two, I focus on the teaching of the *Philokalia* on thoughts of a particularly troublesome kind, which the *Philokalia* refers to as "passions". I have started here partly because this is such a central theme of the *Philokalia*, but also because it is where human beings start in trying to order their thoughts. It is a study in the unruliness of human thoughts, their tendency to go astray, and the nature of the challenge that they present to those who wish to shepherd them.

3. In Chapter Three, my controlling metaphor turns from rural life to the world of medicine, and I consider the remedies for the passions that the *Philokalia* prescribes.
4. Chapter Four might be considered a glance towards my final destination, rather than a step forward. However, if it is a step forward, it is the step of understanding how the *Philokalia* conceives mental well-being. In the medical terms of the previous chapter, it is concerned with better understanding health in order to be better equipped to treat the disease of the passions.
5. Chapter Five steps aside from the *Philokalia* in order to give consideration to the contemporary world of psychotherapy. What is psychotherapy, how does it conceive mental well-being, and what does it aim to achieve? The possibility of understanding the as providing a kind of psychotherapy is then considered. This raises questions about the nature of the soul, or self, and human concerns with inwardness and reflexivity.
6. Chapter Six attempts to explore the relationship between thoughts and prayer. When the *Philokalia* is consulted as a source of reference on thoughts, or the inner life, it always turns the focus onto prayer. When it is consulted as a source of guidance on prayer, it turns the reader's attention towards a careful examination of their thoughts. This relationship therefore seems to be central to the *Philokalia*. It is studied here with reference to the preceding discussion on psychotherapy, and also by way of a brief exploratory engagement with some other western strands of thought, on philosophy (Paul Ricoeur on hermeneutics) and spirituality (Denys Turner and *The Darkness of God*).

In the Epilogue, reflecting briefly on the steps that have been taken, we shall return to the theme of shepherding thoughts and ponder where our journey has taken us.

I will close this introduction with one final quotation from the *Philokalia* on the theme of sheep and shepherds, this time from Ilias the Presbyter:

Where fear does not lead the way, thoughts will be in a state of confusion, like sheep that have no shepherd.

Where fear leads the way or goes with them, they will be under control and in good order within the fold. Fear is the son of faith and the shepherd of the commandments. He who is without faith will not be found worthy to be a sheep of the Lord's pasture.⁵

Here, then, is the question to be addressed. How does the *Philokalia* teach us that we can control and order thoughts that are confused, difficult to control and in disorder?

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