

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## A Christian Appraisal of Contemporary Philosophy

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Young men and women, if they have any ambition, will not be satisfied merely to earn a living and to establish themselves in a comfortable, but meaningless routine. People of serious intentions want to make an effective impact on the world around them. Christian men and women not only *want* to leave their mark on the world, but they are under divine *obligation* to make the attempt. To do so, to achieve anything above a mere average result, one prerequisite is an understanding of the civilization of which we are a part. If we wish to be persuasive, we must know what other people are thinking. Therefore, to understand our contemporary society, it is desirable, I should like to say, essential to have a grasp of recent philosophy.

The reason that philosophy is so important in understanding a civilization, the reason why therefore philosophy is essential to anyone who wishes to influence society is simply that on the whole philosophy controls the thoughts of men. People may not be aware of the factors which influence their thinking; they may never have heard of the world's greatest thinkers; but over a period of time the theories of philosophers are popularized, publicized, and are then incorporated in the thinking of ordinary citizens.

One example of a philosopher controlling the thinking of a later generation, in this case the religious thinking of the early twentieth century, is that of Friedrich Schleiermacher. It was he who produced modernism. There were many Christians forty or fifty years ago who took alarm at modernism, but they did not always recognize its source nor understand its leading ideas.

Therefore they were puzzled at its popularity and were at a loss to meet it. These fundamentalists thought modernism was merely a matter of denying miracles, the Virgin Birth, the Atonement, and the Resurrection. But these were only the implications of modernism. At its basis was a different view of the nature of religion. Schleiermacher had recommended a religion based on experience instead of on revelation. His thought was essentially man-centered rather than God-centered. The Psychology of Religious Experience replaced Theology and the doctrines of the Bible were then discarded one by one. Even today, when the fortunes of modernism have ebbed in the seminaries, millions of people in the pews continue to think more or less as Schleiermacher taught. To meet modernism adequately, one should know its source, its motivation, and the essential structure of its ideas. In general, if one wishes to work with people who have unconsciously accepted the views of an earlier thinker, it is most desirable, I would

like to say essential, to understand the factors which have formed their opinions.

However, the contemporary philosophy about which I wish to speak is not the modernism of Schleiermacher and Ritschl. Later I wish to speak of a secular philosophy and of a religious movement that have some basic elements in common and which between them pretty well characterize the thought of the United States today. The secular philosophy is Pragmatism or Instrumentalism, and the religious movement is called Neo-orthodoxy. Both of these derive from one or a few philosophers who lived about a century ago.

Near the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hegel dominated all philosophy. No one else approached him in breadth of interest, profundity of insight, or power of detailed reasoning. His system of Absolute Idealism claimed to have a rational explanation of everything. Reason had solved all problems, and The System was well nigh perfect. After his death his philosophy spread from Germany, overshadowed all else in England, and was widely held in American Universities.

During this time of Hegel's popularity, there began in Germany, indeed among Hegel's immediate students, a movement that was destined to control our twentieth century thought. Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard both studied under Hegel. Both came to the conclusion that Hegel was terribly mistaken. They agreed that Reason had not solved all problems and that Reason could not solve all problems. In one way and another they and their followers disparaged Reason. Thus, though Marx and Soren Kierkegaard differed on many points of importance, the former being an atheistic socialist and the latter an individualistic Christian, the two of them in their common attack on Reason initiated the irrationalism that characterizes a large section of today's thinking.

By irrationalism I do not mean a view, like that of Roman Catholic philosophy, which defends a sphere of faith superior to reason; nor do I mean any judicious distrust of so-called rationalizations and quick and easy solutions to difficult and intricate problems. Irrationalism here means a fundamental

repudiation of reason itself. In this type of philosophy the very forms of thought, the very processes of logic are denied validity.

To come to grips with the main subject matter it will be enough in the first place to give a short account of the secular philosophies of William James and John Dewey with their immediate European predecessors, Friedrich Nietzsche and Emile Durkheim. Then, in the second place, I shall compare this secular philosophy with some of the basic factors in the religious movement known as Neo-orthodoxy.

Nietzsche the German and Durkheim the Frenchman, sixty or seventy years after the first attacks on Hegel's deification of reason, arrived at their irrationalism through a biological approach. Though they may not have been the first to apply the principles of evolution to philosophy, they did so more thoroughly than any of their predecessors.

With this approach it follows in both cases that there are no universal standards of morality nor are there fixed forms of logic binding all thought. Both logic and morality are subject to flux. As for morality Nietzsche proclaims the Superman who is superior to traditional standards, and Durkheim has each society produce its own standards so that it cannot be judged on the standards of any foreign civilization.

The effect of this view on the forms of logic can best be approached by emphasizing the naturalism that Nietzsche so clearly expresses. Naturalism, in popular, inexact language, is a sort of materialism. Not only does Nietzsche repudiate the universal Hegelian Reason, he also denies the existence of a soul or mind. For him, as it was for Marx, the starting point of all philosophy is the body. Therefore, he concludes, the notion that the universe is amenable to the forms of human thinking is downright naive.

Everything that reaches our consciousness, so he says, is simplified and adjusted to our needs. We never find a fact of nature; we never grasp things as they are. The whole apparatus of knowing is a simplifying device, directed not at truth, but at the utilization of the world for our human purposes.

Logic as an evolutionary development distorts reality, and what we now call truth is simply the kind of error without which the species cannot survive. The basic law of logic is the law of contradiction. We cannot think without it. But this, in Nietzsche's opinion, is only a sign of our inability – our inability to affirm and to deny one and the same thing. To suppose that logic and the law of contradiction are adequate to reality presupposes a knowledge of reality prior to and independent of this law. Obviously therefore the law of contradiction holds good only for assumed existences that we have created.

Both Nietzsche and Durkheim consider the laws of thought to be the product of evolution. Today men are born with these evolutionary products so bred in them that they cannot think otherwise. These habits are useful, but this does not make them true. According to Durkheim the concepts of time, contradiction, and causality are the outgrowths of religious rites and social ceremonies. There is no universal concept of time or causality; each society has its own. Individuals who used categories different from those of their society were treated as insane, were eliminated, with the result that only those people survived who used the socially approved modes of thought.

William James continues this attack against what he calls the "serpent of rationalism." The Hegelian Absolute is futile and theism is vacuous. The categories of logic are evolutionary products. Space and time are not *a priori* intuitions but artificial constructions. Other categories could have been developed, and might have proved as serviceable as those we use now.

Toward the end of his life James also denied the existence of consciousness and gave evidence of adopting the viewpoint of behaviorism. At any rate, John Dewey very clearly bases knowledge on biological functions and explicitly professes a certain type of behaviorism.

John Dewey traces all knowledge back to "sensorimotor co-ordinations." Time and time again Dewey objects to "mentalistic" terminology. Mind, he says, is the complex of bodily habits. Indeed, habits

formed in the exercise of biological aptitudes are the sole agents of observation, recollection, and judgment. A mind which performs these operations is a myth; concrete habits do all the perceiving and reasoning that is done. In one place Dewey very bluntly says knowledge lives in the muscles, not in consciousness.

Since these muscles and biological aptitudes are directed toward survival, it follows for Dewey that truth, including the laws of logic, is instrumental. Our concepts have been devised as tools for solving our problems. If an idea or concept works, it is true. This pragmatic principle that truth is what works is much more clearly stated in Dewey than in James. From reading James one might suppose that the truth of an idea is tested by putting it to work. If the test is successful, the idea is proved to have been true.

For example, some Christians might borrow from James and say that we should put God to the test; we should believe in God; we should accept the idea of God. Then if our belief is confirmed by success in the affairs of life, or at least in a future life, when God's judgment justifies our belief, the idea of God will be clearly seen to have been true.

Dewey prevents a Christian from using pragmatism in any such way. For him, "ideas are statements, not of what is or has been, but of acts to be performed." "An idea or conception is a ... plan to *act* in a certain way." Therefore the idea of God is not the idea of pre-existing Being; it is a plan of action, and its meaning is totally exhausted in the overt muscular movements of solving a problem. Similarly the concepts of physics and chemistry, such as gravitation or sulfuric acid are not statements of antecedent existences, but of operations in the laboratory.

Naturally Dewey says the same thing about the concepts of logic. The law of contradiction is constructed as a useful tool for the purpose of solving a problem. So long as this law of logic is useful, it will be retained. When in the future another problem arises for which this tool is not adapted, we will invent a different concept, we will

form a different plan of operation, we will formulate a different sort of logic.

Now, Dewey was such a voluminous writer and his views have been so influential on any number of subjects that it is tempting to continue with an extended exposition of his philosophy. However, the occasion forbids; and having made the simple point of instrumental behaviorism, I must rush on to my criticism of the logic it proposes. The **criticism** too must be brief and constricted. This I regret, for the matter, in my opinion, is extremely important. Irrationalism is a widespread phenomenon. Essentially the same views are found among the logical positivists and the Oxford analytical philosophers. For example A. J. Ayer, like Dewey, holds that logic is an arbitrary construction and that "it is perfectly conceivable that we should have employed different linguistic conventions."

In a moment it will be shown that Neo-orthodoxy also entertains much the same idea of logic. This is why a knowledge of secular philosophy is so important in religious discussions. They are both branches from the same trunk. None of their forms can be fully understood apart from the common background. Therefore, if the common logic of these several schools is defective, one criticism will engulf them all.

If logical principles are arbitrary and tentative, either because they are the procedural stipulations of the analytical school, or because they are the conventions of a society, or because they are behavioristic muscular habits, and if therefore it is conceivable to employ different linguistic conventions, it should be possible for these philosophers to invent a different convention and to abide by it as they express their views. Can they do so?

Now, the Aristotelian law of contradiction which they reject or which they assert can be rejected requires that a given word must not only mean something, but it must also not mean something else. The term *dog* must mean dog, but also it must not mean mountain; and *mountain* must not mean metaphor. Each term must refer to something definite and at the same time there must be other

objects to which it does not refer. Suppose the word *mountain* meant metaphor, and dog, and Bible, and the United States. Clearly, if a word meant everything, it would mean nothing.

If, now, the law of contradiction is not a fixed truth, if it is merely tentative, and if another form of thought is conceivable, I challenge these philosophers to write a book in conformity with their principles. That is, I challenge them to write a book without using the law of contradiction without insisting that words have definite references. As a matter of fact, it will not be hard for them to do so. Nothing more is necessary than to write the word metaphor sixty thousand times. Metaphor metaphor metaphor metaphor. This means, the dog ran up the mountain; for the word *metaphor* means dog, ran, and mountain. But unfortunately the sentence "Metaphor metaphor metaphor metaphor" also means, "Next Christmas is Thanksgiving;" for the word *metaphor* has these meanings as well.

The point should be clear. One cannot write a book or speak a sentence that means anything without using the law of contradiction. Logic is neither a procedural convention, nor a product of society, nor a muscular habit. Logic is an innate necessity. Whether it be the secularism of John Dewey and A. J. Ayer, or the religious theory of the Neo-orthodox, or even the frequent pietistic depreciation of our so-called fallible human reason, this irrationalism makes all intelligible religion impossible. Each definite doctrine singly and the sum of them as a verbal revelation are emptied of all meaning. But fortunately this irrationalism makes itself impossible also. The theories of Nietzsche, Dewey, and Ayer are self-refuting because they cannot be stated intelligibly except in virtue of the law they repudiate.

The second half, or I should say the second part of this paper, for instead of being an equal half, it will be only a short appendix, deals with neo-orthodoxy. The exposition of Neo-orthodoxy must be brief and constricted as the preceding exposition was. Only enough will be given to show that Neo-orthodoxy shares the same irrationalism and therefore suffers the same fate of unintelligibility. This is the case because they are twin products of the same anti-

Hegelian motif. Karl Marx stimulated the secular and naturalistic reaction, and Soren Kierkegaard furthered the religious reaction. Both held reason and intellect in low esteem.

For Soren Kierkegaard God is truth; but truth exists only for a believer who inwardly experiences the tension between himself and God. If an actually existing person is an unbeliever, then for him God does not exist. God exists only in subjectivity.

The emphasis on subjectivity and the corresponding disparagement of objectivity results in the destruction of Christianity's objective historicity. The historical is not the religious and the religious is not the historical. Real religion does not consist in understanding anything; it is a matter of feeling and anti-intellectual passion. To base one's religion on objective history puts it at the mercy of the ever-changing results of historical criticism. It is absurd to suppose that eternal blessedness can be based on historical information.

The important matter is not what a person believes, but how he believes. The method of religion is not intellectual; it is an experience of suffering and despair; it is passionate appropriation and decision. *What* is appropriated is of little importance.

In his vivid style Soren Kierkegaard describes two men at prayer. The one is in a Lutheran church and entertains a true conception of God; but because he prays in a false spirit, he is praying to an idol. The other is actually in a heathen temple praying to idols; but because he prays with an infinite passion, he is in truth praying to God. For the truth lies in the inward *How*, not in the external *What*. "If only the *How* of this relation is in truth, then the individual is in truth, even though he is thus related to untruth."

This illustration implies that it is objectively indifferent whether one worships God or an idol. What counts is the individual's subjective relation to an unknown Something. But if our worship is directed to an unknown Something, rather than to Hegel's Knowable Absolute, or to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who gives us information about himself, there would seem to be no distinguishable difference between worshipping God and worshipping the devil.

Most of the contemporary disciples of Soren Kierkegaard continue this anti-intellectualism. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr asserts that every affirmation about man's place in the cosmos becomes involved in contradictions when fully analyzed. There is no escape from rational absurdity. Man is free from reason with a freedom that is above all the categories of philosophy. However, for the purposes of this lecture, I shall confine the analysis to the views of Emil Brunner.

Emil Brunner distinguishes between two varieties of truth. First, there is the ordinary truth of everyday affairs, mathematics, and science. One may call it abstract truth. Brunner calls it It-Truth to distinguish it from the second variety, which he calls Thou-Truth. As we pass from logic and mathematics, through sociology and anthropology, on to theology, we leave the abstract It-Truth and enter the religious realm of personal relationships. Here man is no mere neutral observer, as he is supposed to be in logic and mathematics, but rather he is himself affected by the truth and exercises faith and personal trust. At the center of this sphere is an individual's personal confrontation with God.

In this experience of personal confrontation the traditional philosophical distinction between subject and object is transcended, and the new truth becomes a relationship of subject to subject. God is never an object of knowledge. One who has had this personal confrontation with God, as the Apostles had, may talk about it later. In talking about it, they use subjects and predicates, they use the forms of logic and abstract thought. But what they say is not really true. Abstract, verbal, propositional truth is merely a pointer to the personal truth. Some propositions point more directly than others, but even the words of Scripture are only pointers.

Brunner does not mean that the words of language are conventional, so that different sounds in different languages mean the same thing. *Dog* and *Hund* and *Chien* are all arbitrary sounds to express the same thought. But for Brunner it is not just the sound or word, it is the thought itself that fails to grasp the object. He says quite explicitly that the conceptual content itself, as well as its verbal

expression, is not the real thing; it is only a framework, a means, a pointer.

For this reason, says Brunner, we should not allow the logic of our language to carry us too far. Although what we actually say in one proposition may validly imply a second proposition, it often happens that faith must curb our logic. Sometimes we may follow the implications of our thoughts, but sometimes faith causes us to deny in the conclusion what we asserted in the premises.

Thus it is that Brunner uses good logic to refute Schleiermacher; but because good logic supports rather than refutes John Calvin, faith curbs our logic and refutes Calvin for us.

Here, obviously, Brunner is in trouble. For why could he not have accepted logic in the case of Calvin and curbed his logic in the case of Schleiermacher? How does one know when to accept the implications of his own assertions and when not to? This question is a *pointer*, it points to the arbitrary irrationalism of Brunner's position. If two implications are equally valid, there can be no *reason* for following one and curbing the other.

In fact, Brunner is in a worse position even than this would indicate – if worse there be. Since all propositions are merely pointers and since their intellectual content is merely an empty framework, it really doesn't make much difference whether our assertions are true or false. Not only is it immaterial whether you or I speak the truth, we cannot even depend on God to speak the truth. Brunner quite explicitly says that a false proposition can be a pointer as well as a true one. God himself is free from the limitations of abstract truth and can speak his special variety of truth in false statements.

"Our knowledge of God" to translate from *Philosophie und Offenbarung* "which we obtain from revelation, is first an As-if Knowledge." That is to say, revelation is not strictly true. We are perhaps to live as-if it were true, but we must not suppose that revelation is the truth. Brunner of course tries to deflect criticism by adding that "This As-if contains no uncertainty – for it is a divinely guaranteed as-if."

It is difficult, however, to derive much comfort from such a divinely guaranteed As-if. For since God sometimes uses falsehood in revelation, the guarantee itself may be As if and false. How could we possibly tell? Even if the divine guarantee were not false, it is still merely a pointer to some unknowable and unintelligible something. It could never be accepted at literal face value.

The underlying objection to Neo-orthodoxy is not that it denies this or that Christian doctrine. The objection is not that it discards half or three quarters of the Bible. The underlying objection is that all intelligibility has vanished. No doctrine remains. Nothing of the Bible is left. Truth has become impossible and we are left to the mercy of blind passion.

This is the outcome of contemporary irrationalism. To it attaches all the opprobrium that the word *irrational* suggests, and the cost of accepting such a viewpoint is nothing less than insanity.

On the other hand, sanity and Christianity require intellect, reason, logic, and truth, for in the beginning was the word, the *Logos*, the eternal wisdom of God.