
Pro Rege

Volume 13 | Number 3

Article 6

March 1985

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Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1985) "Philosophical Roots of the Secular Academic Mind,"

Pro Rege: Vol. 13: No. 3, 27 - 32.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol13/iss3/6

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Philosophical Roots of the Secular Academic Mind

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A charter member of Dordt's faculty, Professor Van Til has taught history and philosophy for more than a quarter century. Now retired, Van Til has kept active reading and writing about things philosophic and timely.

In the *Banner* of September 6, 1982, Edwin Walhout began the first in a series of eleven articles on "Secularism and Christianity." In that first article Walhout proposed that there is a "trickle-down principle" at work by which the influence of an idea makes its way from its originator to the general public. Walhout proposed the sequence "philosopher to professor to student to average people." Walhout used Kant as a typical example of the "trickle-down principle." He stated that Kant was the originator of the popularly held idea that knowledge and belief do not mix.

In what follows I want to point to some additional examples of ideas which by the trickle-down method have become part of modern secular academic mind. Though in this case the transfer may be from philosopher to professor, the trickle-down idea is still appropriate because many professors have not consulted the philosophers but were secularized by their undergraduate teachers.

While there have been several recent discussions of secular humanism, most have identified the ideas without tracing them back to their source. The late Francis

Schaeffer in an effort to supply Christian students with an intellectual defense of the gospel did identify secular ideas with pagan thinkers.² His critics alleged that he did so at risk of over-simplification. I realize that in what follows I am placing myself in a similar jeopardy.

In his 1956 publication, *The Secularists Heresy*, the English churchman Harry Blamires makes "the refusal to recognize the supernatural" the basic secularist error. I would agree that the denial of the supernatural³ is a basic omission in the secular view of reality. Believing that there is no supernatural as the context of human existence translates into the idea that man is completely autonomous.

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ning rather simplistically, at that time Thales of Miletus concluded that the basic stuff of reality was water. As he stood on the shore of the Aegean Sea on a foggy morning, presumably, the empirical evidence fortified his conclusion. This conclusion committed Thales to a materialistic ontology, i.e., theory of being. Subsequent materialisms growing out of such later developments as Newtonian mechanism or Darwinian evolutionism showed greater refinement but shared Thales' basic apostasy.

In tracing back the roots of the secular mind chronologically the next appropriated idea comes from Socrates. Because he introduced the critical method of discourse which sometimes bears his name, Socrates became the patron saint of rationalists. It was the aim of Socrates to expose all conclusive statements to the light of reason and thereby decide their validity and reliability. He did this relentlessly and did not flinch in the face of unpalatable conclusions. This

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by his fall became the prototype of secularism. It was there that the first decision was made which laid claim to the idea that man could make a moral judgment without reference to a divine mandate. With that decision as its model the secular mind refuses to recognize its creaturely status. It invariably remains opposed to its Creator unless there is an intervention of divine grace.

Formal philosophy had its beginnings with Greeks in the early sixth century B.C. Begin-

rationalism also provided Socrates with the foundation for his ethics. For him the right was the reasonable and the reasonable was the right. Right reason became the final arbiter for truth and meaning.⁴

Following the lead of Socrates, Plato branched out to develop a rationalistic theory of knowledge and metaphysics.⁵ Plato made the all-inclusive claim that the real is the rational and the rational is the real. How do we get in touch with that reality? Reality is constituted in a universe of,

eternal, immutable Ideas. We get in touch with those Ideas through intuitive reason. It is the reality in us most like the reality of the Ideas.

To use a figure by way of explanation, reason is the only instrument we can use to fish in the stream of reality and come up with an understanding of the nature of things. The rationalist is like a fisherman who goes to seine in a river. He takes a net of a specific sized mesh and then insists that whatever escapes his net cannot be classified as fish. Eventually, a stultifying irony developed around the claims of rationalism. While other philosophers recognized that they began with presuppositions which involve a faith commitment, rationalists throughout the centuries have claimed for themselves an uncommitted objectivity.

I think I ought to add that a fascination with Plato's universe of Ideas should not beguile us into giving them some kind of creditability. Because Ideas cannot be found on land, sea or air, even Christians at times have tried to etherialize them into some kind of transcendent source of truth. But like a space satellite, the Idea can never give us any thought which we did not bounce up to it initially. Plato's Ideas are pseudo-transcendents. They will never bring to us any divine revelation.

The theory of Ideas which Plato originated became the basis for the later universals controversy. That controversy also had important implications for modern secular thought. For Plato the Ideas gave one the eternal essence of things as their prototype. The Idea subsists as the model of the existent thing. Ideas are before the thing. As the Latin has it, *ante rem*.

Aristotle came to a different conclusion. Aristotle argued that things share a common essence which qualifies them as to class. For example, humankind shares an essential humanity. For Aristotle the essence, then, is in the thing, that is *in re*. The essence, then, is the shared "universal." As inherent in the thing, the universal furnishes a common bond which ties things together. So too

people as things are not inherently discrete entities. Their union through the universal should forestall any pretensions towards individualism. This Aristotelian "realism" could be used to defend the universal church and its hierarchy and its politicized form, Christendom.

Though Plato continued to have his devotees, Aristotle's realism as remodeled by Thomas Aquinas became the dominant philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church. But Thomism was soon challenged. In the early fourteenth century out of England came William of Occam to dispute the reality of universals as conceived by Aristotle and his subsequent followers. Occam, as he was generally called, insisted that what was claimed for universals as the necessary shared essence of things was based on a mistake. For Occam, universals, names, that is, are no more than a puff of vocal sound which we conveniently use to identify things. For Occam, things are atomistically discrete. We join them by names, hence, nominalism, as the name for Occam's new approach.

Though an innovation in the early fourteenth century, the idea of a disjointed universe, one without a basic cohesion was not without precedent. The pre-socratic Heraclitus had at least skirted the idea when he maintained that everything is in a state of flux. One cannot "step into the same river twice" because it is not the same from moment to moment. It has no abiding essence. However, we can conclude that Occam offered to his contemporaries a radical alternative to the previously accepted concepts concerning universals.

Professor Richard M. Weaver, late professor of history at the University of Chicago, rated nominalism a most radical departure from previous thought and one of the most important root ideas for subsequent secular thinking. Professor Weaver wrote:

The practical result of nominalist philosophy is to banish reality which is perceived by the intellect and to

posit as reality that which is perceived by the senses. With this change in the affirmation of what is real, the whole orientation of culture takes a turn, and we are on the road to modern empiricism.

It is easy to be blind to the significance of a change because it is remote and abstract in character. Those who have not discovered that world view is the most important thing about a man, as about men composing culture, should consider the train of circumstances which have with perfect logic proceeded from this. The denial of universals carries with it the denial of everything transcending experience. The denial of everything transcending experience means inevitably—though ways are found to hedge on this—the denial of truth. With the denial of objective truth there is no escape from the relativism of “man is the measure of all things.”⁶

Blamires referred to the elimination of a transcendent as the elimination of the supernatural. Nature, then, is all there is. And in nature there is no place where one can stand in order to gain preferential authority, hence relativism. But eliminating the transcendent also commits one to philosophic naturalism. I already took note of nominalism's atomism. Weaver called attention to its nascent empiricism. Using a modern figure, we can conclude that nominalism as a basic idea was launched into philosophic space carrying a multiple warhead.

Some of the important effects of nominalism were not long in coming. The idea of a hierarchical universal church, under Luther had to give way to the idea of the “universal priesthood of all believers” which stressed the value of the individual.⁷ Later nominalism abetted by Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest could be used to defend the “rugged individualism” of

laissez faire economics. Today individualism buttressed by the claim of human autonomy lends support to abortion solely by individual choice.

Some may assume that we ought to stop next to take note of the Italian Renaissance. I will pass it by as it was busy mostly with warmed over ideas which came from the Greeks of the classical period, that is, the Hellenic age. For example, Marcilio Ficino and his *de Medici* sponsor attempted a revival of Platonism. Lorenzo Valla introduced critical studies but it was mostly a literary application of the oral method of Socrates. Leonardo da Vinci in his time was newly busy with empirical studies and experiments but the idea went back to the work of Aristotle and, as we noted, was given new philosophical support by Occam. I move then to the seventeenth century and the work of Renes Descartes.

Descartes was rightly disgusted with the methods and thought of the late medieval scholastics. They often occupied themselves with trivia. They devised puzzles which were based on the compounding of incommensurable aspects of reality. Reputedly, they asked the inane question, “If angels are incorporeal, how many can dance on the head of a pin?”

Not only was Descartes inclined to turn away from the idle speculations of effete scholasticism; he saw that it would take a new broom to sweep away the cobwebs that had gathered in the epistemological structure of philosophy. Sitting in his tent in a military encampment in Germany during the Thirty Years War, Descartes busied himself with the development of a new philosophic method as well as with the construction of an analytic geometry. He set down his philosophic thoughts in his *Discourse On Method*.⁸

Descartes' new method was that of methodological skepticism. According to that method one must doubt every truth claim that it is possible to doubt. Using that method, Descartes concluded that it was possible to doubt every conceivable idea ex-

cept the concept of his own existence. His thinking was proof to him that he was an existing thinker. Descartes summed up his finding in the Latin phrase, *Cogito ergo sum*, that is, "I think, therefore I am." He believed that his conclusion was a reasoned conception completely independent of any sense reference. He thus became the father of modern rationalism, giving a new foundation to the critical method of Socrates. Descartes gave the modern secular mind a presumptive right to skepticism by way of a backup for the relativism which was nascent in the nominalism of Occam.

At this point we should focus our attention briefly on the late seventeenth century emphasis on empiricism. Both John Locke and George Berkeley repudiated Descartes' claim that we could lay the foundations of our knowledge in innate ideas without reference to sense data. Locke and Berkeley gave philosophic support to the beginnings of the scientific revolution which gave credit to empiricism as the basis for its success. Presently, the empirical-rational method became the *sine qua non* of scientific endeavor, that is, sense data organized by reason as its operational method. I should add that a Christian working in science does not deny the validity of the empirical-rational method. He does deny that all truth claims must be empirically verified.

David Hume brought empiricism one step further. He not only maintained that all our knowledge is based on sense impressions but that is all we can have in relation to reality. Proceeding on that assumption Hume reconstructed the accepted ideas concerning causality.⁹ Men like John Locke as well as popular opinion held that in the succession of A following B there had to be some underlying connection. Hume disagreed. For him our idea of cause is the result of tying events together by noting their temporal succession and physical contiguity. It is like objects moving along the line of a conveyor belt with the conveyor belt removed. Hume did not deny the need to think causally but he denied that we could prove that

underneath there is more than our sense perception. Thereby Hume introduced modern man to a new route to ontological skepticism.

For Immanuel Kant, Hume's ontological skepticism was a startling irritant which caused him to rethink previously accepted conclusions concerning the source of knowledge. If the structure of reality does not furnish us with ordered patterns for our use, how do we arrive at the practicalities which allow us to manipulate our world? Kant concluded that we impose that order by our innate forms of intuition, that is, the concepts of time and space through which all our perceptions are filtered, and the categories of thought which the mind furnishes for the ordering process. These forms render *das Ding an sich* (the thing in itself) intelligible to us.

And so Kant proceeded to divide his world according to two worlds of discourse. One world, the world of sense phenomena, through the methods of science yielded statements of fact. The other world, the world of noumena, the world of religion, ethics, and aesthetics, yielded statements of belief. Hence, the idea that belief and knowledge do not mix—an idea, as suggested by Walhout, which trickled down from Kant.

The logical positivists, beginning with the Vienna Circle philosophers in the 1920's, went beyond Kant. They insisted that a strict dichotomy should be maintained between statements of fact and statements of belief. For them, only those statements which can be empirically verified, that is, those that can be subject directly or indirectly to sense inspection, can make a truth claim. Only such statements have a right to declarative status. It turns out then that statements such as, "God is love" have the form of a declarative but lack the power thereof. They must be rated a pseudo-declarative. Presently, some positivists concluded that all non-sense statements must be considered to be nonsense. Others held that religious statements must be considered to be sym-

bolic or metaphorical statements rather than statements of fact. At best they can be distantly analogous to statements of fact. A.J. Ayer rated ethical statements to be no more than an evocation of emotion.

Before summing up I want to refer to a suggestion which the late Francis Schaeffer made concerning philosophic root ideas. In his little book *Escape From Reason*, Schaeffer suggested that by the introduction of his dialectical method, Hegel "opened the door to that which is characteristic of modern man. Truth is gone, and synthesis (the both-and), with its relativism reigns."¹⁰ Presumably, if we follow Hegel in his contention that every thesis has its antithesis which can yield a higher synthesis, then the antithetical Christian manner of thought which can posit a "Yea" or "Nay" will forever give way to a dialectical "Maybe." Schaeffer contends that antithesis-oriented Christian parents don't understand their college educated children because Hegelian dialectic has put the latter on a different epistemological wavelength, one that allows for everlasting equivocation.

By way of summation, I allege that the secular mind has been formed by many or most of the philosophic root ideas which I have discussed. Out of those ideas there has also been distilled the critical method of study with empirical-rational techniques which are useful to the Christian thinker as well. But the root ideas which are the foundation of rationalism, naturalism, relativism, positivism, dialecticism and such, are apostate intellectual refinements which buttress mankind's original sinful claim to autonomy. They cannot be part of the furniture of the Christian mind.

In his book *The Christian Mind* which followed his *The Secularists Heresy*, Harry Blamires used the following chapter headings to characterize the Christian mind: "Its Supernatural Orientation," "Its Awareness of Evil," "Its Conception of the Truth," "Its Acceptance of Authority," "Its Concern for the Person," and "Its Sacramental Cast." Taking my cue from

Philippians 2:5-8 I would maintain that all the characteristics of the Christian mind as suggested by Blamires will follow from the basic attitude of obedience.

To Blamire's list I would add, "Its Willingness to Think Antithetically." I believe that an obedient repudiation of the claim of human autonomy and a willingness to antithetically oppose the philosophical secular refinements by which that claim is defended will make one a strong defender of the Christian faith in the academic world. That defense ought to begin by attacking the apostate root ideas by which the secular academic mind is formed.

Endnotes

¹Banner, Sept. 6, 1982, p. 12.

²See my "Francis Schaeffer in Review," *Pro Rege*, Vol. VI, No. 4, June, 1978, p. 2 ff.

³I am mindful of the fact that there are those who insist that "natural" and "supernatural" are reminiscent of a nature-grace dichotomy which is not in keeping with the kind of distinctions which "reformational" thinkers want to maintain between creation and the Creator. Compare, John Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture* (Marlton, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., 1978) p. 305.

⁴For purposes of this discussion I want to clearly distinguish between rationalism and rationalistic. Rationalism I take to be the ideology which makes reason the final test for truth and meaning. As such it is an idolatry and is apostate. By contrast, one can have a preference for an appeal to reason as overagainst, for example, feeling or intuition. This does not commit one to reason as opposed to God's Word as the final foundation for truth and meaning.

⁵Plato, *Republic*, Bk. IV, *Dialogues of Plato*. B. Jowett, Trans., (New York: Random House, 1892) p. 770 ff.

⁶Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) p. 189.

⁷At the University of Erfurt, Luther came under the influence of Gabriel Biel who strongly supported nominalism as an antidote to the earlier scholasticism.

⁸"Discourse on Method," *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1955) Part II, p. 87 ff., Part IV, p. 101 ff.

⁹David Hume, "On The Understanding," *Treatise on Human Nature*, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1949) Bk. I, Sec. III, p. 81 ff.

¹⁰Francis Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason*, (Chicago: Intervarsity Press, 1968) p. 41.

¹¹Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1966) Compare "Table of Contents" p. v. i