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Academic Orientation at Dordt

by Nick Van Til
Professor of Philosophy



Mr. Van Til received his A.B. from Calvin College. Subsequent to military service in World War II he spent a semester at Westminster Theological Seminary in the study of Apologetics. Thereafter he received M.A. degrees from the University of Michigan in both history and philosophy and followed further graduate studies in philosophy at Michigan State University.

I suppose that if you were to ask, "What do you think you are doing here?" or "What do you think you are supposed to be doing here?" we would answer something like this.

We are trying to develop a community of Christian scholars on the assumption which was expressed by Socrates in the words, "The unexamined life isn't worth living," or to borrow the syllogism of Professor Holmes of Wheaton in his little book The Idea of the Christian College, "Experience alone is not understanding.

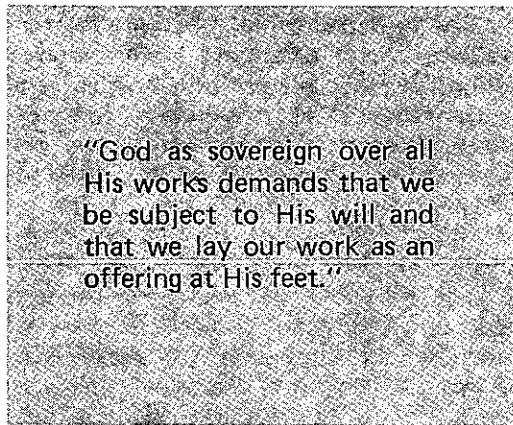
Education seeks understanding. Therefore experience alone is not education." (p. 66).

But as soon as you ask, "What does that examination of life consist of?" you will find that we may differ with many who have posed the question, though, perhaps, not repeating the exact words of Socrates or having his precise intentions. Even the mention of Socrates might give one the kind of reaction found in the Clouds of Aristophanes where he had Socrates suspended between heaven and earth in a basket to indicate a kind of

academic detachment. The same kind of elevated disassociation from ongoing life is expressed by the "ivory tower" kind of reference. I hope we are not identified with either of those age-old stereotypes.

And I think we can say that we should not be so identified, for we take the Scriptures as the prospectus by which we should be guided in our work. And can anyone say that there is anything detached or "ivory tower" about the Scriptures and their approach to life? They speak to us where we are in all our daily affairs, no matter what place or station we may have, academic or otherwise. We believe the Scriptures have the primary authority and complete relevance as we enter the halls of academia.

We would emphasize the fact that we hold the Scriptures to be inspired,



infallible, and inerrant. That does not mean that we presume to be infallible and inerrant interpreters of all its meanings. We do agree on its basic message which the Reformed community has summed up in the Confessions that are often referred to as the "Three Forms of Unity."

If you look through Dordt's catalog, you will notice that we have no department of religion. If that strikes you as an odd omission in the catalog of a Christian college, then let me explain. We hold that the Scriptures speak to the heart

of man for all of his life. All of life is religious, even as John Dewey intimated in a "sermon" which he preached to the Christian Students Association at the University of Michigan on Sunday, March 17, 1892. We hold that the directives and testimony of the Scriptures radiate out to all the disciplines of our curriculum. And so, to borrow another phrase from Holmes, "Every teacher must be an avocational student of the Scripture" (p. 52).

The all-encompassing expanse of control exercised by the Scriptures arises out of the fact that it has been given to us as creatures by our sovereign Creator. God as sovereign over all His works demands that we be subject to His will and that we lay our work as an offering at His feet.

As we have broadened the concept of religion to include all of life, we have taken it out of that narrow concept which it usually carries as it is limited to the cultic expression of our worship. So we also carry the concept of dedicated service out beyond the doors of our churches to all of life, which, for us, constitutes our work in God's Kingdom.

As we work in the Kingdom, we see ourselves ruled by God's Word and Spirit, but we also see the created order beyond ourselves as the realm of God's rule and activity. So we can be co-workers with Him in all that is recreatively human. And then, we may say, in that consecrated sense, that we can be busy with all manner of "humanistic," or, better, "human" activity.

Though the whole of creation is under God's rule, God deals covenantally with man in a personal way as he brings about recreation in Christ. The covenant idea is a prominent part of our theological heritage in the Christian Reformed Church. It has been the foundation of our Christian School Movement. For some, the covenant concept has been looked upon as a kind of family affair. But, if all of life is religious in its re-creation, it is also completely covenantal. The covenant stood first of all in the order of creation. Thus,

to live covenantally, as we see it, is to carry out the cultural mandate in the whole order of creation. Therefore, in every aspect of higher education, we must proceed as those who keep covenant with Jehovah God.

The covenant concept also carries with it the concept of antithesis. Augustine enunciated this idea as a philosophy of history in his Civitas Dei, The City of God. Following that lead, we begin with certain fundamentals of the Christian faith which will not allow us to assume a neutral or noncommittal attitude towards the data we find in our fields of competence as scholars. We never presume to work in any area that is not part of God's creation. We don't presume that this always shows up, so that we are doing something ostensibly different than our secular counterparts, but we hope that we work with a noticeably different, Scripturally self-conscious intent. The idea of the antithesis would also intimate that secularism has religious intentions of its own, even though they may not have been formalized by ritual expression.

The idea of antithesis also leads us to the question, "How do you presume to do honest, respectable, critical scholarship if you hold to a prejudicial faith commitment?" Having already indicated that everyone has a faith commitment of some sort, we can answer further by suggesting that we must clarify the ideas of honest, respectable, and critical.

By honest I mean that we never hide or deliberately stack the data in order to reach some preconceived conclusion. I think it is inevitable that we have confrontations with non-Christian thought, and that we not only ask the right questions but that we furnish some answers. But I hope that in our rejoinders we do not fulfill the fear of the 1966 Danforth Report which suggested that, particularly in the case of Roman Catholic colleges, it was often a case of setting up straw men in order to knock them down without much of a struggle. We also hope that academically we don't engage in quix-

otic tilts with windmills while the real encounter should take place elsewhere.

As to academic respectability, I think the question may validly be asked, "Whose respect do we really value?" If by academic respectability is meant that we must at all times and in every case meet the demands of a strictly empirical-rational standard, then I am sure that at times we will be found wanting. By the faith which we profess and by the Biblical dogmas which we accept, we have already outlawed that empirical-rational method as the final arbiter of truth and meaning. We have honestly said that we exercise faith as we accept certain dogmas. We would hope that those who stand by the empirical-rational method as their ultimate appeal would be as honest as Santayana and admit that they embrace that method with a kind of "animal faith." We would not engage in question-begging except to admit, that, as to fundamental premises or perspectives, all, of whatsoever religious confession, whether secular or Christian, are engaged in circular reasoning—a form of question-begging. So we proceed as respectably as anyone when it comes to fundamentals.

Finally, I would say that we prize obedient thinking more highly than critical thinking, if by critical thinking one assumes that, as already suggested, one has to abide by the canons of the empirical-rational method no matter what area one enters by way of discussion. To put it another way, in obedience to our Christian Faith there are some hypotheses which we cannot entertain. For example, the eternity of the world. So by some standards we cannot be completely free-thinkers. If, then, free-thinking is a credit, it is a credit only insofar as complete relativism is creditable. On our credit side we have this, that we have a fixed goal and some idea of how to get there.

When speaking of things academic, Christians have insisted that we take on the mind of Christ, but they have not always correctly interpreted the meaning of "mind" as it appears in Philippians 2:5.

In the King James translation we read, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ." We do have a model here for Christian academia, but it should read, "Let this attitude be in you which was also in Christ," namely, the attitude of complete obedience to God in all things. This includes things academic even if it may at times jeopardize the respect of secular colleagues and not measure up to critical thinking as defined by empirical-rational standards.

The Danforth Report of 1966 and Holmes' discussion of the Christian College puts the "Defender of the Faith" type of college under some stigma. I think we should still be willing to carry the label, but only with the assurance that it not be considered our business to perpetuate unscriptural moralisms which often are confused with Christian morality, nor to defend the status quo when it has no better support than traditionalism. We ought to defend "the Faith once for all delivered to the saints."

Addendum

Because the foregoing in its original draft was written for a rather limited and academically select audience, for purposes of this journal I thought I ought to elaborate on some of the concepts that have not been fully explained. The original limitation as to time also demanded limits which the limitations of space here do not impose.

In view of my rejection of the empirical-rational method as the bottom line of validation for truth and meaning, I should bring it under further discussion. The empirical-rational method has long been sacrosanct in some secular halls of learning. In fact, for some, the very questioning of its validity even in the area of final answers is to come under the suspicion of either ignorance or impudence.

Like philosophy itself, empiricism, depending on the senses as the source of knowledge, has had a long history going back to the early Greeks. In our century,

however, perhaps we most closely identify empiricism with the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle. Following the lead of Ernst Mach, they chose to canonize the empirical way to truth. Positivists generally insist that any statement which purports to make a truth-claim has to be empirically verifiable. You must be able to check it out through the senses either directly or indirectly. If a statement makes a truth claim and is empirically verifiable, then it may and rightly should take the form of a declarative sentence. For example, "The car is blue," assuming it is spoken concerning an existent car, can be checked out by a sense inspection and so is also a genuine declarative sentence. This should be obvious and creates no problem. But then we meet such sentences as "God is love." This obviously cannot be verified empirically. We do know and can see that certain people act as if "God is love," but we cannot inspect that claim in any way that resembles our inspection of the color of the car. So our sentence, "God is Love" is parading under false colors, as it were. It is disguised as a declarative statement when actually it is a pseudo-declarative. The latter designation might not be so serious if it were not for the fact that for the positivists, pseudo-declaratives also disqualify themselves in the making of a truth claim. They seem to assert something, but do not.

As a logical and naturalistic corollary to his empiricism, the positivist must eliminate the whole of any non-sense world. There is only the natural. There is no supernatural. There is only the physical. There is nothing metaphysical. These denials on the part of the positivistic philosopher were a considerable threat to job security. If there is only the natural and that is the province of the natural scientists, what is there left for the philosopher to do? Many philosophers had engaged themselves in large part with metaphysics. Perhaps they would now be in line for some job training by way of adjusting to new employment.

Such worries would concern only the idealist philosophers. Positivists have a whole new field of their own creating now waiting for them. In the interest of clarification and better understanding, they can engage in language analysis. They now have the job of unmasking the pseudo-declarative sentences which hide in our language as true declaratives and have no right to make a truth claim. Religious language in particular seems to be loaded with a host of non-literal statements which should not be taken concretely and should be exposed as metaphorical and non-assertive.¹ So language analysis emerges as a new field of philosophic endeavor as a spin-off of positivistic tenets. And we have a whole new breed of philosophers, sleuths of syntax or grammatical gumshoes, as we might call them.

Striving for clarification, of course,

of his theory of being and his theory of knowledge, for the positivist, the sentence is both a non-sense statement and nonsense.

Enthusiasm for empiricism peaked before midcentury and is now somewhat in eclipse, as are various forms of rationalism. We have moved into what Francis Schaefer and William Barrett would characterize as an age of irrationalism, or to use a Schaefer title, there is an Escape from Reason. This does not mean that the methods of language analysis have been abandoned. Sometimes even Christians in doing their philosophy use that method to such an extent that they virtually force reality to obey the laws of syntax, instead of proceeding as if the laws of syntax are conditioned by something that is basic in reality, namely, the existence of law itself. (Let me say parenthetically

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was not new among philosophers. The dialogic and dialectic method of Socrates most certainly had that as its aim. Most philosophers who are not positivists are not willing to follow the positivistic line to its extreme conclusions. While most philosophers will agree that there are non-sense statements in our language, they will not relegate the larger part of these statements to the limbo of nonsense as the positivists do by reason of their denial of all metaphysics. For those doing language analysis as a philosophic endeavor, "God is love" can at best have emotive meaning for the Christian. On the basis

that one does not have to subscribe to a Cosmomic philosophy to recognize law in creation.)

In the exercise of faith, the empiricist puts his trust in the natural sciences, the positive sciences as they are often called. He places his faith there because the predictive capabilities of the natural sciences have such evident and obvious practical results. But here we often find a strange anomaly in the philosophy of the secular scientist. In his work he presumes on the uniformity of nature, which would suggest the presence of fixed ordinances in creation. Yet, when it comes

to setting down the bottom line of his ontology, his theory of being, the secular scientist chooses chance rather than the Creator. To repeat the expression from Santayana, the empiricist places his confidence in the reliability of the empirical method on the basis on an "animal faith." When new discoveries and theories put the empiricist faith under pressure, the inveterate empiricist resists change like any other dogmatist and refuses to give up his sense verification canon of validation, his verificationism.

Though experience constitutes the bottom line of verification for positivism and other varieties of empiricism, reason plays an important part in its method. The data of sense are organized by reason, and theories are tested for consistency according to the rules of logic. But for all his analytic activity the empiricist would repudiate the contention that the mind comes equipped with some innate content. Present-day empiricists honor the tenet of one of their illustrious forebears, John Locke. Locke maintained that the mind comes to the task of learning as a tabula rasa, a blank tablet.

Looking somewhat more closely at the rational side of the empirical-rational formula, we should take account of the fact that empiricists use rational procedures and that rationalists are willing to make use of the senses in their pursuit of knowledge. Even so, rationalists insist that the mind comes equipped with some innate ideas and with the capacity which allows it to make the inductive or deductive leaps that are required to make an inference from sense data or to follow an argument.

Throughout the long history of philosophy, its ivory towers have been peopled with more rationalists than any other philosophic species. Not only that, but very persistently rationalists have claimed a very special status for themselves. They almost invariably claim that they do not base their system on any faith construct, but on the self-evidence of reason. In so doing, they presume to escape the

circularity and question-begging attributed to all faith constructs, whether that circularity be considered "vicious" or not.

The epistemological and ontological sleight-of-hand regularly practiced by the rationalists has tended to hide the fact that they accept the self-evidence of reason as the bottom line of their system on the basis of faith just as all other philosophies do. This neat trick of illusion and delusion has brought about a false dilemma in the posing of basic questions about theories of knowledge. It has caused many to pose the epistemological question as a choice between faith and reason. Presumably, faith is the inclination of the religiously oriented who take account of divine revelation. Reason is the route of those who William James would call the tough-minded, who don't need a reference to or the support of a supernatural being.

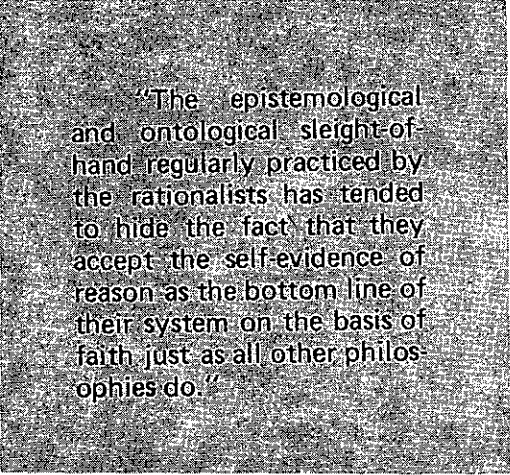
Aristotle was so convinced of the infallibility of the self-evidence of reason and reason's high position in the pursuit of knowledge that he suggested that if one is not amenable to the proofs of reason he "is not better than a vegetable." Aristotle's man had a vegetative, a sensitive, and a rational soul. The latter should characterize man. If one fell short in his rational capacities, he might be thought less than a man, and actually could be considered a case of arrested development.

Bertrand Russell, contrary to many rationalists, is willing to admit that all philosophies have their metaphysics, that is, their faith foundation.² In his discussion of the philosophy of John Dewey, Russell writes,

In every writer on philosophy there is a concealed metaphysics, usually unconscious; even if the subject is metaphysics, he is almost certain to have an uncritically believed system which underlies his explicit arguments. Reading Dr. Dewey makes me aware of my own unconscious metaphysics as well as his. Where they differ, I find it hard to imagine any arguments on

either side which do not beg the question; on fundamental issues this is unavoidable.³

A little farther along in his discussion, Russell calls attention to Dewey's use of the little phrase "of course." Russell cautions us that "of course" usually introduces "what may be taken as an underlying metaphysics."⁴ In spite of the fact that a man like Bertrand Russell, co-author



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with Alfred North Whitehead of that monument of logic, Principia Mathematica, is willing to own up to his own metaphysics, many rationalists continue to delude themselves with the kind of philosophic whimsy which claims escape from faith and dogma.

In the 1975 issue of Philosophia Reformata, Dr. Peter Schouls of the University of Edmonton engages in an interesting and illuminating discussion of the predisposing prejudices of the rationalists under the title "The Incapacitating Presupposition of Rationalism." Schouls calls our attention to the fact that the rationalist holds that the only way in which we can know in philosophy is by the natural light of reason. Moreover, this natural light of reason is its own guarantee. It is self-authenticating, so that by its use we can avoid error on any particular point of philosophy. Schouls writes as follows:

The last line of defense of the Rationalist against an opponent who charges that there is no such thing as the natural light of reason which is its own self-evident, independent, self-supported object is to provide examples of such objects. If the examples do not satisfy the opponent, the opponent has not been given a reason to recognize the existence of the natural light.

At this point several courses of action appear to be open to the Rationalist. (i) Agree with his opponent that the natural light of reason does not exist because no example satisfactory to the opponent can be given of a self-evident truth. (ii) Agree with the opponent that the natural light of reason is something accepted without there being an argument for such acceptance; that it is something merely believed in by the Rationalist. (iii) Consider the opponent at least philosophically prejudiced (he is unwilling to cast his eyes in the right direction) or philosophically incompetent (he is incapable of casting his eyes in the right direction).⁵

Schouls goes on to say:

Since the natural light of reason is the chief defining characteristic of the Rationalist position and since this defining characteristic is, by the Rationalist, taken to be not a presupposition, the Rationalist takes his position to be presuppositionless. From this he concludes that philosophy is presuppositionless. This means that all philosophic activity is taken to be autonomous, presuppositionless activity. And this means that, for the Rationalist, all philosophic activity ought to begin with, or result in, full understanding of the ar-

guments and position of the participants in the activity.⁶

On the basis of the foregoing, Schouls concludes that

The Rationalist philosophers qua philosophers are not interested in discussion which, in principle, cannot involve full understanding at each point of each point. This means that the Rationalist is interested only in "dialogic discussion," and not in "argumentation." The principal lack of interest in "argumentation" tends to preclude the possibility of the Rationalist presenting his potentially interesting and non-trivial contributions to non-Rationalist philosophers' positions, and tends to make it impossible for non-Rationalist philosophers to make their contributions to the Rationalists' position.... Clearly, a degree of isolationism is, in principle, inherent in the Rationalist position. Such isolation is a weakness rather than a source of strength. Since it (isolationism) is the result of the acceptance of the natural light of reason, it is the presence of the natural light of reason as characterized by the Rationalist which is, for the Rationalist, an incapacitating presupposition.⁷

Schouls maintains that the rationalist is not interested in argument, but only in dialogue. I believe that Schouls has the order reversed. The rationalist is interested only in argument wherein the deduction will follow what is evident to the natural light of reason as it canonizes the law of non-contradiction. By so restricting the parameters of argument, the rationalist also excludes dialogue, as any dialogue can only attain significance for him in the measure that it too complies with rationalism's basic canon. His is indeed an incapacitating presupposition.

It is the case then that the rationalist's

faith in the self-evidence of reason turns out to be a "control belief." This belief functions as a limitation for the rationalist, just as the Christian scholar has Scripturally-imposed control beliefs which place certain limitations on his investigative activity. Let me re-emphasize. The Christian cannot seriously entertain any and all hypotheses whatsoever. He cannot seriously entertain the hypothesis that the universe is the result of chance. He could not join an archeological expedition which was seriously interested in finding the skeletal remains of the body of Jesus. In other words, even as a scholar, he cannot be completely "open-minded." Obedient attention to God's Word will prevent his hypothesizing in certain directions concerning some events and subjects.

We conclude then that empiricism and rationalism, each in its own way, fail to qualify as the bottom line of verification for a Christian epistemology and, therefore, for Christian scholarship. Consequently, we maintain that of all the dogmas which are competing for man's faith the Christian dogmas derived from God's Word are the only reliable dogmas. These the Christian appropriates confessionally as he works in any aspect of Kingdom work, whether that be the work of a scholar or any other vocation worthy of a Christian.

Footnotes

1. Cf. Rudolph Carnap, "Religious Language Is Meaningless," The Problems of Religious Language, N.J. Charlesworth, Ed. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1974, p. 121 ff.

2. I am not classifying Russell strictly with the rationalist, though in his book Why I Am Not a Christian he uses many of the old rationalistic arguments.

3. The Philosophy of John Dewey, Paul Arthur Schillp, Editor. Tudor Publishing Co., New York, 1939, p. 138.

4. Ibid.

5. Philosophia Reformata, 1st and 2nd quarter, 1975, p. 40.

6. Ibid., p. 43.

7. Ibid.