

# THE NATURE OF THEISTIC APOLOGETICS

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The resurgence of evangelical scholarship in recent years has been marked, as one would expect, by a resurgence of literature on and interest in theistic apologetics. Those works which, from the philosophical viewpoint, may be regarded as significant, have adopted certain distinctive methodologies. Consciously or unconsciously they have elected procedures which imply certain views of the nature of theistic apologetics. This paper is an essay in this area of prolegomena. Its purpose is to point the way to a methodology which, it is believed, is both more consistent and more acceptable than certain others which are on the market. The basic thesis is the truism that philosophical apologetics must be understood and pursued with reference to the intent of the term "philosophical."

At the risk of being mistaken for a Kantian, we derive our framework of reference from the prefaces to the *CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*. Both there and elsewhere Immanuel Kant distinguishes three types of philosophy. The first is *dogmatism*, "the presumption that it is possible to advance in metaphysics without previous criticism," and which he regards as "the true source of the unbelief . . . which militates against morality."<sup>1</sup> Kant has in mind, of course, the optimistic speculations of the German Enlightenment descended from Leibniz and Wolf. The second is *scepticism*, an intellectual nomadism, whose advocates "hate a permanent habitation and settled mode of living, attacked from time to time those who had organized themselves into civil communities."<sup>2</sup> Here he obviously thinks of the Hume who awoke him from his own "dogmatic" slumbers. The third type of philosophy is his own, *criticism*, that scrutiny of man's rational abilities which constitutes the necessary prolegomena to any future metaphysics.

Nearly one hundred eighty years have elapsed since this framework was introduced. Let us therefore attempt to bring it up to date and adjust it to our present purposes. "Dogmatism" will be used to denote not just the wholly uncritical but also those of rationalistic bent who profess to attain logically absolute certainty. In this tradition stands Descartes with his geometrical method and the boast that

There is nothing so far removed from us as to be beyond our reach, or so hidden that we cannot discover it provided only we abstain from accepting the false for the true, and always preserve in our thoughts the order necessary for the deduction of one truth for another.<sup>3</sup>

It is the tradition that grew from the Thomistic disjunction of philosophy and theology, and which consequently aided the rise of rational theology and deism in the eighteenth century. It reflects the mechanist outlook on nature and the rationalistic assumptions of the Scholastic tradition.

The verdict of both history and epistemology is, it seems to me, against dogmatism. The relativity of human knowledge, the eclipse of pure rationalisms, and the distinction between logical certainty and psychological certitude have become philosophical commonplace. Dogmatism is to be regarded as passé. Whether or not it may be rejected with a dogmatism equal to its own, there is at least every reason for serious hesitation.

"Scepticism" has a long history. From Pyrrho to Montaigne, from Hume to modern positivism, it has assumed the equipollence of all rational arguments and argued that the relativity of knowledge amounts to the impossibility of knowledge. It has left man in existential predicaments, devoid of logical certainty, and without

rational justification for heeding his psychological certitudes. It sees "a great gulf fixed" between knowledge and life. It is in this spirit that Hume is usually understood when he advises, "Be a philosopher: but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man."<sup>4</sup> For metaphysics operates in detachment from life, rather than stemming from our involvements therein.

"Criticism" is the category that needs most adaptation. The term is now employed in a much broader sense than by Kant. C. D. Broad contrasts criticism with speculation, using these two terms to denote respectively the analytic and synthetic functions of philosophy.<sup>5</sup> In this category we shall therefore embrace not only the Kantian scrutiny of man's rational capacity, but also the contemporary schools of philosophical analysis stemming from men like Moore and Wittgenstein, and coming to its latest vintage in the Oxford Ordinary Language movement. In general this tradition asks questions about our knowledge claims: their possibility, their meaning and implications, and the logic and language by which they are expressed. In certain forms, criticism is both anti-metaphysical and sceptical; but in its "better" forms, it does not rule out metaphysical system building, but, with Kant, it regards criticism or analysis as the necessary propaedeutic thereto. The nineteenth century quest for a *Weltanschauung* developed naturally from the work of philosophic criticism. So today: the quest for a twentieth century *Weltanschauung* must develop from the work of philosophic analysis.

This historical excursion has been necessary because we are enquiring into the intent of the term "philosophical" as used in connection with apologetics. And the simple fact is that in such connections it appears to be used in all three senses. Just as philosophies may be classified under dogmatism, scepticism and criticism, so may apologetics.

Philosophical dogmatism in apologetics flourished during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, as did dogmatism in philosophy *per se*. Christians who understood the nature of philosophy in the Cartesian sense proceeded much as did Descartes. Optimistically they sought to develop linear arguments that could end with a triumphant "Q.E.D." This attitude most often persists today in popular rather than in technically theological circles. The traditional theistic arguments are brandished as the weapon that will annihilate all opposition. The existence of God is proven . . . Q.E.D. There is, however, the occasional evangelical scholar with thorough philosophical preparation who takes a dogmatist position in apologetics. In his recent book, *THE RESURRECTION OF THEISM*,<sup>6</sup> Stuart C. Hackett insists that rational objectivity is actually possible. He develops a Kantian-style epistemology, adds the preformation theory which Kant rejected, and concludes with a rationalistic optimism comparable to that of Descartes himself. By setting up disjunctive syllogisms he progressively eliminates as self-contradictory every alternative other than theism itself. This position is itself proven by the empirical arguments, whose relevance to the noumenal world is guaranteed by the preformation theory previously adopted.

Hackett, of course, could argue that he is a critical philosopher, and not a dogmatist. He writes, "The knowledge of knowledge is basic, finally, to the knowledge of being."<sup>7</sup> We shall not argue this point. But in that he seeks rationalistic certainty and regards many metaphysical conclusions as demonstrative, he is plainly a dogmatist as well. His avowed purpose is to show that "insofar as they [men] are rational, the theistic explanation of reality is *the only one* which can logically be accepted and believed by a reasoning mind . . ."<sup>8</sup> Men reject the theistic arguments, not because they cannot follow them to their logically necessary conclusions, but because they refuse to accept these conclusions.

Now if, as we have suggested, rationalistic dogmatism is the product of a past intellectual milieu, if it is to be regarded as somewhat passé, if we are to learn the

lessons of history, then the conclusion follows that this method is an unfortunate choice for use in theistic apologetics because it manifests an unsatisfactory understanding of the term "philosophical."

Historically speaking, philosophical scepticism has been a favorite method with apologists who reacted, and understandably so, against the extreme dogmatists. Tertullian, fearing the inroads into Christianity of Platonic and Gnostic rationalism, cried *credo quia absurdum est*. Blaise Pascal, repulsed by Descartes' rationalistic optimism, allowed himself to be convinced by Montaigne that the Greek sceptics were correct and that rational metaphysical arguments are all equipollent. He therefore reduced faith to what becomes, from the dogmatist viewpoint, an irrational wager. It is not at all surprising that Edgar Sheffield Brightman should complain as follows:

Pascal's passionate cry that "the heart has reasons which the head does not know," taken literally, is a demand for a dual personality and for a contradictory "truth."<sup>9</sup>

The same "Christian scepticism" is found in Sir William Hamilton, in Soren Kierkegaard, and because of his influence, in contemporary existential theology where the logical law of non-contradiction is replaced, for finite movements of thought, by dialectical paradoxes. Brunner's words are typical: "The hallmark of inconsistency clings to all genuine pronouncements of faith."<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately the "sceptical method" is not confined to the neo-orthodox camp. The existentialist influence has pervaded evangelical thought, and with it has arisen in evangelical apologetics a type of what Kant would call "philosophical scepticism." As one example, let us cite Edward J. Carnell in his *CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT*. To this observer, this book manifests a significant departure from the so-called "Christian rationalism" of his *INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS*, a departure in favor of a "Christian existentialism" which explicates the meaning of man's moral predicament rather than seeking common rational ground with the non-Christian. Carnell explicitly rejects the "classical" approach of those who treat of man in the abstract; he repudiates the apologetic that denies the possibility of any truth outside Christianity, as well as that which appeals to "evidences that are accessible to human self-sufficiency."<sup>11</sup> He speaks instead of a third kind of knowledge, distinct from both the empirical and the rational, knowledge by moral self-acceptance, and so bases his new apologetic on the Kierkegaardian notion of a third locus of truth, previously explored in Chapter XI of *A PHILOSOPHY OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION*. This third locus is "truth in the heart;" it appears to be a misnomer, a pseudonym for that holiness without which no man shall see God. For the purposes of apologetics "truth in the heart" displaces "truth in the head." This is simply Pascal reworded. It assumes that metaphysical arguments are irrelevant to theistic apologetics. This "sceptical" view of philosophy is indeed a precarious position for one to take who wishes to maintain that the Christian's knowledge of God is both cognitive and logically true.

It will be well, here, to make three qualifications. First, Carnell does not state sceptical conclusions as bluntly as a Pascal, Hamilton or Kierkegaard. Rather he implies them by eclipsing the rational approach. Nor does he violate the logical law of contradiction; but neither did Pascal. Second, it could be said that he is re-orienting Kant's moral argument for the existence of God. This is quite apparent. But he is doing so in an existentialist setting emphasizing the individual man rather than the abstract universal. It must be remembered also that Kant himself regarded the efforts of rational metaphysics as quite futile. The *ding-für-mich* so obscured his *ding-an-sich* that, apart from the demands of practical reason, he could not help but be a sceptic as to the nature of reality. Third, these criticisms

must not be interpreted as implying that existentialism has contributed no genuine insights to Christian thought. They are intended rather to guard against a blanket acceptance of either rationalism or existentialism, dogmatism or scepticism. It is not necessarily a case of either conclusive proof or no rational bases at all, of all or nothing. Philosophy is not that easy. It involves the unremitting task of arduous self-scrutiny—the painstaking analysis of concepts and beliefs, expressions and arguments. The degree of thoroughness with which analytic philosophy is thus pursued will determine the degree of logical conclusiveness—or, if you prefer, the degree of probability—which may be ascribed to any position in order to justify or qualify the certitudes we feel.

This leads us to the third type of apologetic, corresponding to the critical concept of philosophy, and asserting neither that reason can prove conclusively the existence of God, nor that reason can say nothing of all persuasive on the subject. Many inductivist apologists fit in this category, who insist that our thinking must terminate on public evidence and yet admit that the evidence affords only high degrees of probability. Here I would classify writers such as Robert Flint and to some extent Bordon Parker Bowne, as well as some of our own contemporaries. Their starting point is the world of common experience and the common beliefs of men. Some, such as Charles Hodge, may seem to go too far in their almost naive acceptance as intuitively evident of almost everything over which philosophers have disagreed. But their intent is plain: to appraise the claims to knowledge made by the common experience and beliefs of man. If they have failed it is in taking too much for granted, in providing insufficient explication and refinement, in not doing enough careful philosophical analysis.

In some regards contemporary critical and analytic philosophy is an attempt to correct such failings. Scottish common sense realism had the right starting point, but it took too much for granted. Beginning with what is commonly held, one must proceed by reflective analysis to explicate, refine, criticize and systematize. This is the Socratic task of persistently investigating each contending idea, in the course of which investigation the relative value of each contending idea comes to light. The quest for meaning must precede the quest for truth.

By way of example, let us take as our starting point the Christians's belief that "men need God." Assuming for now that the term "men" is understood to denote the total personality rather than the Cartesian "ghost in a machine," and that the term "God" is understood in terms of Christian theism, we need to analyze this belief, to explicate and refine its intent so as to ascertain whether it is merely what Hume would call a *customary* belief, one that is culturally relative, or whether the existence of the Christian God is what we might call a *necessary* belief: that is to say, whether men do indeed *need* God. First, it plainly does not mean that God's existence is either demonstrable or intuitively evident. Nor does it mean just that men need to accept as fact the existence of God. To "need God", as every Christian knows, involves far more than this. It involves logical, ethical, religious and emotional needs. Logically, I need God in order to account adequately and consistently for man and the universe. This is where the traditional theistic evidences come in. Ethically, I need God in order to understand man's moral sensitivities, and in order to acquire that moral dynamic which is lacking. Religiously, I need God as an objective, personal Supreme Being, whom to worship. Emotionally, I need One on whom to rely when all else gives way. The full explication of the meaning and legitimacy of these needs and the relevance of Christian theism thereto is the task of apologetics.

Is this sort of approach relevant? First, notice that it combines insights from the other two traditions in apologetics: the dogmatists, who focused attention on

logical necessities, and the so-called Christian sceptics who focus on the other aspects—the more “existential.” Second, it should be observed that the appeal from human needs is not new. In the Appendix to Lecture III in his *CHRISTIAN VIEW OF GOD AND THE WORLD*, James Orr speaks of “God as a Religious Postulate,” using a very similar approach. B. P. Bowne<sup>12</sup> employs similar tactics. Both are somewhat reminiscent of the Kant who regarded God not only as the necessary postulate of the moral life, but also as the “transcendental ideal of pure reason,” the ideal, that is to say, which human rationality finds to be a necessary though indemonstrable postulate.

One final methodological implication must be brought to the fore. Apologists in our third tradition have often employed an intuitive test for truth. Ideas that are self-evident, clear and distinct, are to be accepted as true. The position advocated above repudiates this procedure.<sup>13</sup> The fact that ideas are clear, distinct and impressive may mean nothing other than that they are meaningful: for clarity, etc., are the criteria of meaning rather than of truth. Critical or analytic procedures, however, seek to clarify and distinguish ideas, so as to discern their truth-value. Understanding must precede judgment. It enables one to detect those relations of ideas which makes possible a coherence test for truth, and to examine their adequacy in accounting for all relevant experience. It helps one to discern the pragmatic value of a belief and so to employ this further test for truth. It is in this way that the use of critical philosophy can aid the apologetic task, by unfolding in all of its coherence, adequacy and practical relevance the meaning of the belief that men need God.

Much more needs to be said, and work needs to be done on the logical and psychological criteria by which “necessary beliefs” may be recognized. In this regard help may be forthcoming from recent British work on the psychology of belief, which follows in the tradition of John Henry Newman’s *Grammar of Assent*. More needs to be said, as well, about the noetic effect of sin and its bearing on man’s recognition of his needs. But what has been said is intended to suggest an apologetic that is neither rationalistically over-optimistic nor sceptically pessimistic, one that seeks to adapt a worthy tradition to the current milieu, and to bring it up to date in the light of developments in the understanding of the nature of philosophy.

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. by J. M. D. Meiklejohn, Everyman edition (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1934), p. 18.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
  3. Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, transl. by John Veitch, Everyman ed. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1912), p. 16.
  4. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Lasalle, Ill.: Open Court Publ. Co., 1952), p. 5. On the inconsistency of separating knowledge from life’s demands, compare Augustine’s classical argument about the impracticability of a total scepticism.
  5. C. D. Broad, “Critical and Speculative Philosophy,” *Contemporary British Philosophy*, 1st Series, ed. by J. H. Muirhead (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942), pp. 75-100.
  6. Chicago: Moody Press, 1957.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 365.
  8. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
  9. E. S. Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1940), p. 181.
  10. *The Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Chas. Scribner’s, 1939), p. 55
  11. *Christian Commitment* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. viii f., 2.
  12. *Theism*, (New York: American Book Co., 1902), p. 22.
  13. Cf. the writer’s position on both the intuitive test and the *consensus gentium* argument, as expressed in “A Realistic Theory of Perception: The Common Sense Argument,” *The Gordon Review*, IV (1958), pp. 6-8.