Philosophy: The Roots Of Vain Deceit

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V ERY WISELY the apostle warned, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit . . ." (Col. 2:8). Unfortunately, evangelicals do not always realize that one cannot beware of philosophy unless he is first *aware* of philosophy. "Why study error?" we are asked. "If one knows the truth, then he can recognize error. Government agents who detect counterfeits spend their time studying authentic bills. A fraud cannot be recognized unless one knows the genuine item."

While that is true as far as it goes, we must go further. Who would go to a doctor who studied only health, one who declared upon hearing a patient's symptoms, "Sorry, I do not research, discuss, or treat disease. I am interested only in health!" The point is this: the evangelical most likely *not* to be able to fulfill Paul's command to beware of philosophy is the one who knows the least about philosophy. This dictum is directly applicable to the question of inerrancy.

The Basic Problem

Clark Pinnock was correct in saying, "The central problem in contemporary theology is neither theism nor ecclesiology, but epistemology" (*A Defense of Biblical Inerrancy*). Let me illustrate this point by a conversation I had with a professor from an evangelical seminary. The denomination supporting the seminary had just emerged from an inerrancy struggle that saw its weaker "inerrancy of intent" statement (which I am convinced Rudolf Bultmann could have signed, though it was carefully worded to sound evangelical) changed to a stronger statement that declared the Bible to be inerrant in fact and intent. All the seminary profs had signed the statement. The furor died down, the constituency was happy, and peace prevailed.

Since I was personally acquainted with the stand of one of the professors, I was curious as to how he could have signed the new statement. I asked him three questions. First, "Do you believe that the synoptic Gospels

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could be teaching one chronological system that represents Jesus as being crucified on one day and/or time of day and the Gospel of John be teaching that Jesus was crucified on another day and/or time of day?" He answered, "Yes, I do." Then I asked, "Well, then, would you not consider this a contradiction in the teaching of the Bible?" His reply was perplexing: "I do not press the law of non-contradiction that far." This answer is filled with epistemological, theological, and even ecclesiastical importance. The third question he did not have time to answer. It was this: "In view of your belief in this factual contradiction in the Bible, how were you able to sign the recent statement of the school that the Bible is inerrant in intent and in fact?"

Now I do not wish to imply that there was no answer for the question, nor even that there was no honest answer. I believe both are possible. This man is both scholarly and godly; I would in no way want to impugn his integrity. What I would like to contend is that when we reach the root question on inerrancy it need not be a matter of either the orthodoxy of the inerrancy statement or the integrity of the affirmers; it may be a matter of the *epistemology* of the interpreter. In short, the real problem is not moral but philosophical. Paul said, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy. . . ."

The extant English literature on inerrancy has little to say about this most crucial philosophical dimension. What could be meant by the statement, "I do not press the law of non-contradiction that far"? The context in which the question was asked limits the possible answers. In the face of a clearly admitted factual discrepancy in the Gospels and in view of the philosophical presuppositions of the linguistical studies in which this professor was thoroughly trained, I would venture to say that he meant something like this: "Reality, particularly religious reality or truth, is not subject to the law of non-contradiction. That is, reality is existential or perhaps paradoxical. No abstract Greek philosophical categories can dictate spiritual truth. There are many kinds of logic, and the Christian exegete is under no obligation to be dominated by Aristotle's logic."

Now, this answer is exceedingly subtle. And unfortunately its implications pass right over the heads of most people in the pew and in the denominational headquar-

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ters, and often elude pastors and teachers in the evangelical college or seminary as well. Indeed, the subtleties are so great that one can readily see why some church leaders think this view is hypocrisy. No doubt some teachers have been deceptive in their stand on inerrancy. However, this need not be the case. It is perfectly possible that the problem is not ethical but epistemological.

The Epistemological Roots

In a helpful analysis of the philosophical problem at the root of the errancy view of Scripture, John W. Montgomery named two villains: epistemological dualism and existentialism. The dualism he traces from "Plato's separation of the world of ideas from the world of things and the soul from the body, to the medieval 'realists' with their split between universals and particulars . . . to the modern idealism of Kant and Hegel . . ." ("Inspiration and Inerrancy: A New Departure," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Spring, 1965). The second enemy of inerrancy, existentialism, Montgomery sees stemming from Kierkegaard. "It has affirmed that 'truth is subjectivity' and that 'existence,' as manifested in personal relationships, precedes and surpasses in quality 'essence,' i.e., formal, propositional assertions or descriptions concerning reality." Thus, concludes Montgomery, "the cultural pressure to existentialism, combined with a powerful tradition of metaphysical dualism, impels much of modern theology to reject inerrancy." According to Montgomery, the most important factor is existentialism, whose "presuppositions (e.g., 'existence precedes essence,' 'the objective-subjective distinction must be transcended,' 'truth is found only in personal encounter,' etc.) can and must be subjected to philosophical analysis and criticism."

The source for an adequate critique of existentialism Montgomery sees in the linguistic analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein and in the verifiability principle in particular. In order for something to be meaningful, it must be empirically verifiable or testable in some way. In accordance with this principle, any statement that is not purely definitional (such as, "all husbands are married men") or else empirically testable is held to be meaningless. All non-verifiable statements are literally non-sensical. Montgomery agrees with Wittgenstein's statement in the *Tractatus*, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Into Wittgenstein's "silent" and senseless category fall such statements of existentialists as "truth is discovered in responsible decisions" and "personal encounter is the only sure avenue to truth." Since these are neither true by definition nor empirically verifiable, Montgomery concludes that they are meaningless. Thus linguistic analysis has helped the evangelical refute existentialism, and therefore destroy the existentialists' objection to inerrancy. Wittgenstein has saved the day for evangelicals! At least this is what Montgomery thinks.

My analysis is that Montgomery is (1) right in identifying the problem, (2) imprecise in naming its source, and (3) incorrect in his hope for a solution via Wittgenstein and empirical verificationalism.

Philosophy is definitely at the root of the inerrancy problem. However, it is not really Platonic epistemological dualism as such that is to blame but Kantian *agnosticism*. This can be shown both historically and philosophically. Historically, the real problem with the traditional orthodox view of inspiration and inerrancy arose not after the Platonic influence on Christianity but after Kant. Furthermore, epistemological dualism in the tradition of Plato does not make it impossible to know God and speak descriptively about him. Indeed, many evangelicals think it does the reverse; they defend a Platonic epistemology as the only alternative to agnosticism.

No, the real problem is not Plato but Kant. It is Kant's bifurcation of appearance and reality, of the thing-to-me and the thing-in-itself, that makes it impossible to know and speak of God. According to Kant, one ends in paradoxes and antinomies when he attempts to speak of God or reality. Kant notwithstanding, not everyone since him has been dissuaded from talking about God. But when people do speak about God, they too often concede that their language is not metaphysically descriptive but at best only metaphorically evocative or existentially relative.

Some have claimed that Kierkegaard is responsible for going beyond Kantian agnosticism to existentialist irrationalism. But irrationalism seems to be the wrong charge to lay at the door of the Dane. God is suprarational but not irrational; Kierkegaard was quite clear on this point. He wrote, "The eternal essential truth (i.e.,

God) is by no means in itself a paradox; . . . it becomes paradoxical by virtue of its relationship to an existing individual" *(Concluding Unscientific Postscript)*.

But even though Kierkegaard was not an irrationalist regarding God, he was an existentialist regarding revelation. Revelation is personal and not propositional, subjective and not objective. In this sense Kierkegaardianism is the product of Kantian agnosticism and militates against the orthodox claim that revelatory language can be truly descriptive of God, and errorless. In short, the source of the problem is epistemological, but the nature of the problem is not really dualism but agnosticism, not actually Plato but Kant.

Montgomery offered Wittgensteinian linguistic analysis—particularly the verification criterion of meaning—as a solution to the existentializing and subjectivizing of religious language. This hope is ill founded for several reasons, in my opinion. First, it has been argued, as Montgomery acknowledges, that the verification criterion of meaning is self-defeating because the principle of verification is itself not verifiable. But it will not do to say that it is offered simply as a definition or a mere linguistic proposal that is itself neither true nor false, for several reasons. (1) If this is so, then metaphysical statements cannot be categorically eliminated as Ayer intended in his first chapter of *Language, Truth and Logic*, "The Elimination of Metaphysics." (2) There is no reason why someone may not offer a contrary proposal about language with equal pragmatic or personal justification (what other kind of justification could one offer, lacking philosophical arguments for it?). (3) Many astute linguistic analysts have given up the attempt to formulate a generally acceptable verification criterion. In an article in CHRISTIANITY TODAY (October 25, 1963), Alvin Plantinga argued that all attempts appear to be either too narrow, eliminating certain empirical or scientific propositions that the verificationists believe to be meaningful, or else too broad, including as meaningful metaphysical and religious statements that the verificationists wish to exclude. (4) Wittgenstein, even in his later writings, clearly intended that his view of language would eliminate both cognitive religious language and a historical verification of Christianity, both of which Montgomery wishes to retain. The subsequent discussion will show that Wittgenstein did in fact hold this view.

Montgomery elsewhere triumphantly (and mistakenly) quotes Wittgenstein's statement that if a book on ethics could be written "this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world." Montgomery adds, "It is the conviction of orthodox Christianity that in Holy Scripture just such a book exists" *(The Suicide of Christian Theology)*. But what Montgomery neglects to say is that according to Wittgenstein *no such book is possible*! The reason for this is clear in Wittgenstein: all religion and ethics goes beyond the limits of language. He states unequivocally, "Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup of water even if I were to pour out a gallon over it ("A Lecture on

Ethics," *Philosophical Review*, January, 1965). Indeed, as it turns out, when it comes to speaking meaningfully about God, Wittgenstein is as agnostic as Kant. He believed that language—meaningful language—is limited to facts, to the world, and clearly God is not a fact in the world. He says of religious statements:

"I would say, they are certainly not reasonable, that's obvious. . . . I want to say: they don't treat this as a matter of reasonability. Anyone who reads the Epistles will find it said: not only that it is not reasonable, but it doesn't pretend to be. What seems ludicrous about O'Hara [an apologist] is his making it appear reasonable. . . . I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition. But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: Here is a man who is cheating himself" *(Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett, University of California, 1967, pp. 57-59).

In like manner Wittgenstein claims that it is meaningless to speak of a "Last Judgment." He writes, "I couldn't say 'yes' or 'no' to the statement that there will be such a thing. No 'perhaps' nor 'I'm not sure.' It is a statement which does not allow of any such answer" *(ibid., p. 58). More correctly speaking, then, Wittgenstein is neither theistic, nor atheistic, nor agnostic. Like A. J. Ayer, Wittgenstein is what I have elsewhere called "acognostic." That is, Wittgenstein claims it is equally meaningless to affirm or deny that God exists or even question whether he does. The agnostic is wrong, said Ayer, because he supposes that it is meaningful to ask the question whether God exists. God is the realm of value, and the world is the realm of fact. And in addition to the basic fact-value dichotomy adopted by both Kant and Wittgenstein, the latter argues for the meaninglessness of all empirically based language about God. We cannot speak descriptively about God, and in Wittgenstein's now famous words, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

In short, the problem is semantic atheism, i.e., the meaninglessness of all alleged God-talk. Indeed, one of the ironies of history is that Wittgenstein turns out to be a Kierkegaardian fideist. Despite the fact that the analytic movement springing from Wittgenstein and the existential movement arising from Kierkegaard are often diametrically opposed, the philosophical forefathers of each were fideistic in their beliefs and "acognostic" in their view of the truth claims of religious language. Recent studies have shown that both Kierkegaard and Tolstoy influenced Wittgenstein. Leslie Griffiths has pointed out that "Wittgenstein's respect for Kierkegaard is evidenced in the distinction between religious belief and empirical justification and the denial that Christianity has its point of departure in the facts of history" (review of *Lectures and Conversations . . ., Mind*, July, 1970).

Wittgenstein does not mention Kierkegaard by name in his book *Lectures and Conversations . . .*, but in a conversation with Friedrich Waisman, Wittgenstein said: "Man has the urge to thrust against the limits of

language. . . . Kierkegaard, too, recognized this thrust and even described it in much the same way (as a thrust against paradox)" ("Notes on Talks With Wittgenstein," *Philosophical Review*, January, 1975).

What Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein have in common is "acognosticism." Both hold that one cannot speak meaningfully—i.e., non-contradictorily—and descriptively about God. They are, along with most contemporary theologians, semantic atheists. Paul Van Buren saw clearly where linguistic empiricism leads when he wrote, "The empiricist in us finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God, but in the very talking about God at all. . . . Today we cannot even understand the Nietzschian cry that 'God is dead!' for if it were so, how could we know? No, the problem now is that the *word* 'God' is dead" (*The Secular Meaning of the Gospel*).

The tragedy is that even some Christians who claim to have a cognitive view of religious language often turn out to be reductive acognostics. Frederick Ferré and Ian Ramsey are cases in point. Ferré rejects any positively descriptive God-talk and contends for a kind of macrometaphoric language that reduces to equivocation. After denying that God-talk is to be understood univocally or by any intrinsic analogy, Ferré admits, "We are left with no more idea of God's own characteristics than that he is responsible for the various characteristics of creation" ("Analogy in Theology," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). In a small group conversation last spring, Ferré responded to my analysis of his view by claiming he held to "equivocation with hope." "With hope of what?" we may ask. The only hope of avoiding equivocation is to have some positive linguistic concepts that can be descriptively applied to God. But these Ferré does not have, on his own confession.

Likewise, Ian Ramsey claims to be empirical and cognitive in his view of religious language in that he develops qualified models that are empirically based, are religiously evocative, and are tested by "empirical fit." But when it gets right down to the crucial question Ramsey warns, "Let us always be cautious of talking about God in straightforward language. . . . When we speak of God as 'supreme love' [for example], we are not making an assertion in descriptive psychology . . ." (*Religious Language*). In short, by his qualified models Ramsey has discovered ways we can engage in God-talk, but he can't be sure that our talk is *about God*. That is, Ramsey's religious language is empirically *meaningful*, but there is really no way to know if it is theologically or ontologically *true*!

What is really frightening is that Ferré and Ramsey are the more hopeful and constructive examples of those who claim a cognitive view of religious language. By contrast, the typical "acognostic" is much further from the "kingdom." In this non-cognitive camp we have everything from Kierkegaard's "paradoxical" language to Bultmann's "myths" to Crombie's "parables" to Hare's "blik" to Jaspers' "ciphers" and Tillich's "symbols." The simple truth of the matter is that none of these

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philosophies of language is capable of carrying an evangelical view of propositional and inerrant statements about God and historical facts. They are all subjective vs. objective or personal vs. propositional; they are existential vs. historical or evocative vs. descriptive.

The Institutional Lesson

Several factors make the "acognostic" view of religious language extremely dangerous for evangelicals. First, in general evangelicalism has been known more for its piety than for its philosophy. Having been largely unaware of the subtlety of philosophy and of the hidden presuppositions of linguistic studies, evangelicals have found it very difficult to fulfill Paul's admonition to beware of philosophy.

Second, those who have raised a warning among us about the philosophical and epistemological dangers, such as Montgomery and Schaeffer, sometimes lose credibility by not always showing great expertise and exactness in their philosophical analyses. The more sophisticated thinkers have tended to reject the essential insight of their argument because of the sometimes oversimplified (or even incorrect) historical treatment in which it is presented.

Third, this problem is accented on an institutional level because those in positions of authority and review are more capable in practical than in theoretical matters. To rephrase Plato one could wish: "O that administrators and board members were philosophers and that philosophers were administrators and board members!"

Finally, those not carefully trained in philosophy—and especially those naïve enough to believe that they can do theology and exegesis without philosophical presuppositions—often imbibe through secular studies a philosophy of language that is at root "acognostic." This is often unconscious and does not manifest itself for years in their teaching and writing. And when it does appear, as in the views of my friend from an evangelical seminary, it is more likely attributable to bad epistemology then to impiety or conscious heresy. That is, the problem is often philosophical and not moral. The teacher really believes he is being honest and orthodox in affirming "inerrancy," but his philosophy of language enables him to believe that a fact can be an existential "fact" and not an empirical

fact, that history is really *Heilsgeschichte* and not *Geschichte*, that logic does not apply to reality but only to concepts, that revelation is only personal and not propositional, and so on.

A Proposed Solution

The solution to the problem we face in defense of historical and factual inerrancy is almost two thousand years old. It is found in Paul's injunction to beware of philosophy. And the first step is to become *aware* of philosophy. Ignorance of the enemy's tactics is not good strategy in any conflict. I would argue strongly for more philosophy in our schools, both undergraduate and graduate. We need to reinforce the philosophy majors we have and encourage the establishment of new ones.

Second, we should encourage more philosophical awareness on the part of non-philosophers in non-philosophy courses. This is especially true in linguistically related areas because of their crucial bearing on the doctrine of the verbal inerrancy of Scripture.

Third, I suggest efforts to make administrators, boards, and constituencies of evangelical schools more aware of the philosophical dimensions of this problem. I doubt seriously that the laity or clergy of my friend's evangelical denomination would buy the explanation for believing factual contradictions in the Bible expressed when he said, "I do not press the law of non-contradiction that far." If they really understood the philosophical and theological implications of his stand, there would no doubt be institutional changes. It is understandable that the layman would tend to think this professor's stand involves dishonesty when in fact it may be no more than the subtlety of philosophy of which Paul warned us.

Finally, I suggest that we answer poor philosophy with good philosophy, not simply with piety. It is not my purpose to do this here. I shall only indicate the direction of the answer, again quoting the Apostle Paul: "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ . . ." (II Cor. 10:5). We must cut the tree of false philosophy at its presuppositional roots. We must ask the Wittgensteinian analysts how they can cognitively communicate to us the truth about God that it is impossible for us to make cognitively true statements about God. Likewise, we must ask the Kierkegaardian existentialists how it is possible to state the objective and propositional truth about God that God is neither objectively nor propositionally knowable. We must ask those denying that the law of non-contradiction applies to God and spiritual truth how they can make this non-contradictory statement. In short, we must show the self-defeating nature of the philosophy that would unerringly eliminate inerrancy. In *The Weight of Glory* C. S. Lewis aptly stated our obligation: "To be ignorant and simple now— not to be able to meet the enemies on their own ground— would be to throw down our weapons, and to betray our uneducated brethren. . . . Good philosophy must exist if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered." □