

A GOD FOR NATURALISM

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Dewey's naturalism has been the predominant influence on at least one type of American thought. All the essentials are there. Such thinking is pragmatic, worldly, scientific in its methodology and totally relativistic. God, as Dewey conceives Him, is in some way the sum of the possibilities that nature exhibits. These possibilities beckon each man and all men. They exist already in an embryonic state, but they also point to the possibility of a fuller and more perfect reality as the result of action aimed at bettering the natural situation. They are perceived by the imagination, can be clarified by the method of science, are tested and modified by experience, and, thus reshaped and purified, shape and purify in turn the activity which they inspire. Dewey would rather call this the "divine" than "God." But his meaning is clear enough. Whatever one calls it, its present reality is no greater than that of the nature of which it is an expression. Whatever reality it may achieve in the future will be no greater than what nature itself achieves through a constant evolutionary process. Where there is only nature in process, what else could be said?

One of the basic notions in Dewey's critique of the traditional idea of God is that such a God would lead man away from the order of nature where he has his roots and the possibility of his human development. He cannot see how a God who exists separately from the universe can in any way at all be a God for man. To direct man to such a God seems to dehumanize and denaturalize him. From one viewpoint at least, the difficulty is well taken. If, along with Aristotle, one thinks of God as entirely separated from the world, a pure thought of thought contemplating itself eternally, there is reason for Dewey's criticism. Even the absolute mind of Hegel, immanent in nature as it was, Dewey thought tended to destroy the reality of the finite and the natural. If God has any reality at all, it is that of nature in process.

The question arises: Is it at all possible to accept Dewey's basic position and at the same time affirm the actual existence of God? It would hardly seem so. Yet an attempt has been made, and it is interesting to see what sort of a Deity emerges out of a reality in process and what can be affirmed about such a being. William H. Bernhardt, for example, a Professor of the Philosophy of Religion, has over a period of twenty-five years sought to affirm a God based on the naturalistic premises. He sees religion as a complex form of individual and group

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behavior which, as such, can be investigated according to the methods of the social sciences. Writing in the *Iliff Review*, he states:

Three presuppositions, then, are accepted as basic to this attempt to discover the unique function of religion: first, religion must be defined in such terms as maintain a fair degree of continuity of meaning with the past; second, the data upon which conclusions are to be based consist in what has been and is acknowledged to be religious behavior; third, no special consideration is to be given to any type of religious experience.¹

From this viewpoint he sees religion as involving three areas: religion is functional; that is, it sets up values obtainable through religious behavior; next, it provides for a reinterpretation of the world in which religious behavior takes place; and, lastly, it involves techniques; that is, social and moral activities. Hence, there are areas which can be empirically investigated and about which conclusions can be drawn and religious concepts formulated.

REJECTION OF ABSOLUTE TRANSCENDENCE

It is clear that from such an approach Bernhardt can only deal with religion from a human sociological viewpoint. He sees the personalist view taken by such writers as James, Brightman, and others, as seriously lacking in any objective data. Such a justification of religion is always based on personal values which lead one to the religious option when intellectual evidence is not sufficient. To accept a God and to act religiously becomes a more personally satisfying choice than does the acceptance of a mechanistic view of the universe. But, while this may enable one to live more serenely in the world, it in no way provides a test for the objective existence of God. There either is a God or there is not, and one's personal preference has little bearing on that fact.²

Nor does the more traditional view of God as an absolutely transcendent Being Who introduces revelation into history fare any better. In such a view there is a discontinuity between God and man. Man is ordered to become perfect, to achieve a pre-fall status, but finds it impossible to do so in natural terms. If salvation cannot come from either nature or history, then man's only recourse is to the supernatural.

The basic factor in the logic of absolute transcendence is the assumption that there is an absolute truth without which life cannot

¹Wm. H. Bernhardt, "Where We Are in Our Religious Thinking," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. II, n.2, Spring 1945, p. 233.

²"The Logic of Recent Theism, Part III," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. V, n.1, Winter 1948, pp. 34-35.

achieve its higher levels, and that justice demands that it be available to us in some other way.³

But Bernhardt sees such a position as neither necessary nor feasible. Such an absolute faith in an absolutely transcendent Being is at best a substitute for knowledge and at worst an invitation to skepticism. It may be true that nature and man are not adequate for the present crisis. But we have only to look at how we have overcome our inadequacy in many areas by a piecemeal attack on the problems facing us. Take, for example, the phenomenal progress made in medicine, psychology, and the natural sciences. Why cannot we expect the same to take place in religion and morals? Furthermore, to flee to a revealed truth is to admit that the human intellect is inadequate to obtain any knowledge on our natural level. But this leads logically to religious skepticism. It is better to seek some probable verifiability than to yield to the total inadequacy of the human intellect in this area.

He has difficulties, too, with revelation. From a philosophical viewpoint the claims made by any type of revelation, whether it be Judaic, Christian, or non-Christian, must all be reduced to some sort of metanoetic knowledge. Obviously, philosophic reason is helpless here. The acceptance of a revealed truth can only lead to dogmatism and the recognition of the absolute claim that man's ultimate fulfillment is not of earth but can be achieved only with the help of a transcendent Absolute.

Bernhardt would rather work with what he calls the presupposition of predictive possibility.⁴ This involves several factors. There is the rejection of any Absolute, as mentioned above. Secondly, there is the acceptance of a given theology as relatively true. Such a theology must have the basic capacity to relate man in value-striving and value-conserving relations with the reality we call God. Lastly, the cognitive task is one of predicting the highest possibilities which confront man, and the determination of the most efficient means of realizing these predictable possibilities.

THE GOD CATEGORY

In striving to acquire some partial knowledge of God, Bernhardt sees the fundamental problem as one of establishing a category under which the God-concept can be handled.⁵ He defines a category as follows:

³"The Logic of Absolute Transcendence," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. VII, n.1, Spring 1950, p. 35.

⁴"The Presupposition of Absolute Demand," *ibid.*, n.2, pp. 74-80.

⁵"Religion and the Problem of Knowledge," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. VIII, n.1, pp. 9-18.

A category may be defined as a comprehensive class of entities, existent or subsistent, actual or ideal, real or imaginary, every member of which shares in a sufficient number of common characteristics or qualities to be classified with the others in some definite sense.⁶

Once a category is selected, it will determine the data to be considered, the hypotheses to be developed, and the methods to be used. The term "category" is not used in a Kantian sense. It is simply a methodological device looking toward clear definition and communication.

Some categories previously employed by other writers can, of course, be ruled out immediately. Such a category as Absolute Being simply will not fit an investigation which is by definition limited to the partial and the empirical. Neither will the category of Immanence-Transcendence work, since this involves a relationship of God to nature; and neither concept is clear as yet. He further rejects the position that God is a sensible-perceptual object. If the existence of God can be concluded from an empirical approach, it will be an inference, not an immediate perceptual apprehension.

Bernhardt sees only two real possibilities for establishing a category for Deity. The first may be termed agathonic; that is, God as a source of value. The second is called dynamic; that is, God as a source of power.⁷ An investigation of God as the source of moral and personal value is generally reserved for the mystic. It is personal rather than empirical. It will result in predicating attributes of God which are moral qualities, such as good, loving, father-creator, etc. The method employed will be intuitive, metanoetic, and even dogmatic. Bernhardt thinks one must ask what God is before asking what values God may have for him. Now, if the only means to obtain a God-concept are those provided by an empirical investigation of the existential medium in which we find ourselves, then it is clear that the category of God as source of value is inadequate.

If we consider God, however, under the category of Dynamic Power, then, at least, we can proceed in accord with the demands of an empirical epistemology. This category treats God as the source of power responsible for all process, including human life. It looks toward a dynamism directing the processes at work in the universe. This provides for the possibility of an empirical method, and it will result in attributes predicated of God which are existential rather than moral-personal.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 14 ff.

Bernhardt sees the use of the category of Dynamism as a common sense approach which respects the inadequacy and relativism of human knowledge. It avoids the absolutizing so characteristic of dogmatism and follows the methodology of both natural and social science. Since these sciences have done so much to further our knowledge of the universe, there is every reason to hope that the method will prove just as satisfactory when applied to God.

There are, however, two difficulties which must be faced. The first is that the category is so broad that literally every phase of the natural process will fit under it. To search for a knowledge of God under the category of Dynamic Directionality confronts the mind with every variety of motion and event and the relationships between them. But along with the difficulty there are also positive values. We are led to face reality as it is rather than to select phases of it which may be of value only subjectively. It also obviates the human temptation to orient oneself to imaginary or possible realities conceived as real in the human mode. The category of Dynamic Directionality is theocentric rather than anthropocentric. God as dynamic power is the primary role in the religious relationship. It gives the individual a truer estimate of his position in the total scheme of things.⁸

But there is a second difficulty. Bernhardt had argued against Wieman that God was in no sense at all an empirical or a perceptual object. If the empirical method is to be used, what value can it have when applied to a non-empirical reality? The solution lies in Bernhardt's definition of metaphysics as employed in an empirical methodology.

EMPIRICAL METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics may be defined as the organization of knowledge of the all-pervasive characteristics, qualities, trends or tendencies of the existential medium in order to provide a framework for the understanding of man and that in which he exists.⁹

For Bernhardt, then, metaphysics is some sort of correlation of empirical knowledge put together from the findings of the more particularized natural and social sciences. He agrees with Carnap that trans-empirical objects are not the proper objects of metaphysical inquiry. Furthermore, metaphysics will involve some kind of verificatory process. There is, of course, the clarification of language. This is, at least,

⁸"The Cognitive Quest for God," in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. XXIII, n.2, April 1943, pp. 91-102.

⁹"A Metaphysical Basis for Value Theory and Religion," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XV, n.2, Spring 1958, p. 14.

instrumentally necessary. There are also activities or operations which are required to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis selected for investigation. But such verification is of two kinds. There is actual or observational verification, and there is implicative or corroborative verification. It is this last type of verification which must be used by a metaphysics which investigates the existential medium with a view to discovering something about God under the selected category of dynamic directionality.

A metaphysics should also be organized around key concepts which are relevant to the age. These should be as few as possible, and Bernhardt limits them to three. They are existence, relation, and modality. Under the notion of existence will come whatever can be known about the existential medium, which is composed of things and events. Thus one will seek within the existential medium for evidence which will lead to inferential conclusions about the nature and reality of God. Bernhardt also calls this Operationalism, since meanings and interpretations are sought within the context of facts rather than in some form of Impositionism; that is, a metaphysics which asserts an Absolute Being independent of the context.¹⁰

Is Operationalism an adequate method for investigating the existence and nature of God? If one will reread the Symbol of Faith adopted by the Council of Trent, Feb. 4, 1546, he will find an answer to this question. The creed reads, in part, as follows:

I believe in one God, the *Father Almighty, Maker of heaven* and earth, of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, . . . by whom all *things were made*; . . . and *again he will come* with glory to judge the living and the dead.

The underlined words in the text quoted are definitely subject to operational definition and verification. "Father" means begetter, and without offspring the term is meaningless. "Maker" denotes manufacture, production and synonymous activities. And the underlined statement concerning Jesus Christ also contains terms with operational meaning and subject to operational verification. "By whom all things were made" implies creative activities, and all-inclusive activities. "And again he will come with glory" is also subject to operational investigation. The first two words quoted, "I believe" are also of the same nature. Belief means readiness to act. And the willingness or readiness to act must eventually express itself or be denied.¹¹

¹⁰"Operational Theism," in *The Iliff Review*, Vol. XVI, n.1, Winter 1959, p. 23.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Bernhardt defines the word "God" as the religious name for that in the existential medium to which men relate themselves in search of religious values. This concept must then be related to the metaphysical approach sketched above.

GOD AND THE CATEGORIES OF EXISTENCE

Existence is divided into five sub-categories: episodicity, which indicates the nature of the existential process; directional momentum, or dynamic directionality, which seems to indicate purpose; modifiability, which concerns the external structure and internal nature of episodes; stability, which indicates a relative constancy; and quality, which is explained as the all-pervasive property of episodes to induce or produce modifications in persons or other episodes.¹²

The next question is, which of these sub-categories can be used to explicate the God-concept? Bernhardt does not think that episodicity is relevant. But it is possible that God is a phase of many or all episodes without being identical with any of them. The next notion, however, that of dynamic directionality, he sees as the primary category of existence with relation to God. With regard to modifiability he would rather substitute the capacity to modify, if one is to predicate this of God. A relative stability seems to be applicable to God. This stability, however, has its negative aspect, since there seems to be that in both nature and man which hampers the process of dynamic directionality. Lastly, the category of quality must apply to God since the Deity must possess the capacity to effect and make differences. Bernhardt concludes his discussion of the categories of existence as follows:

In the case of God, as in that of other realities, we do not believe it is possible to discuss the existence of God *as such*. There is no evidence to assert that God is a Being possessing the several properties or characteristics just discussed. All that we can assert in Operational terms is that these characteristics appear. What may be required, in terms of presuppositions, to make them possible, was considered in the articles on "The Cognitive Quest for God" which may be considered later if time permits. Here it is sufficient to note that Directional Momentum appears to be the primary category of Existence in the development of Operational Theism.¹³

THE CATEGORIES OF RELATION

These categories are based upon and in the fact of otherness.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 24-25.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 25.

Hence, they recognize the evidence of a pluralistic universe. The first notion here is compresence. Nothing exists in isolation. Obviously it applies to God. For God as dynamic directionality is present with all actuality. The second category of relation, emergence, does not seem to apply. It indicates, rather, the creativity of the directional momentum. But it would be difficult to say that God as such is emergent. The third category is multiplicity. Can this be attributed to God? Here Bernhardt makes a distinction. He would rather say that God is generically one. At the experimental level, however, directional momentum is found varied and variable, and must be viewed as numerically plural.

The next category is selectivity or non-neutrality. The terms indicate involvement and participation. They are, therefore, the key attributes of God under the general category of relation.

The next relational category is *Selectivity or Non-neutrality*. These terms indicate involvement, engagement and participation. They also indicate avoidance, rejection or repulsion. This is the key category for the conception of God at the relational level. Non-neutrality or Selectivity is implied in the conception of Directional Momentum. It is Directional Momentum which is responsible for the changes experienced or observed within ourselves, within society and in the universe as a composite of episodes.¹⁴

The last category in this series is called transeunce. It is defined as the effect of the episodes upon one another as a result of their interaction. It indicates indirect and long range effects, the carry-over of one episode, or at least part of an episode, into another. In more traditional language it could be called immortality. God is implicated in such long range succession since it is the activity called directional momentum which makes this possible.

CATEGORIES OF MODALITY

Modality specifies how the categories subsumed under it function as related. The first of these subsumed categories is spatiality. This does not appear to apply to God. It could be said that God functions within many areas. What is affirmed here is that directional momentum may transcend one episode, but transcendence of all episodes is denied. In other words, God as directional momentum, or dynamic directionality, is ultimately and totally immanent in every identifiable episode. Here Bernhardt uses a somewhat unfortunate example. He says that, if it is true the great galactic systems emerged from some

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 26.

more basic field of energy, which he previously called durationality, this would provide an inferred context within which all that is knowable appeared. This, he states, could very well be an inferred "Ground-of-Being" so popular in contemporary theology.¹⁵ Nothing could be further from the minds of Tillich, Heidegger, and Rahner. But neither could anyone operating under the influence of Dewey's methodology interpret it in any other way.

So, too, when we ask whether the next category, temporality, will apply to God, the answer has to be yes, in this context. If all we can know of being is as we find it in time, then to be and to be temporal are identical. All momentum is episodic and takes place in time. If God is operationally verifiable within episodes and not independent of them, then God, too, is subject to temporality. Bernhardt adds a caution here, however. He admits he is talking about an experiential approach to God under the aspect of a religious need. In this sense only is spatio-temporality predicated of God.

Finally, it can be said that since directional momentum occurs within episodes, it also occurs in a limited, finite way. But it is also selective, tending toward realizable goals, overcoming chance and randomness. This selective culmination becomes the ground for a later theory of values. The last three attributes of God under this category are, then, limitation, determinateness, and culmination. Bernhardt summarizes his position as follows:

We may summarize this attempt to base a conception of God upon the metaphysics developed in terms of the three undefined terms of our Limited Vocabulary. (i). As to Existence, God is the religious name for the Directional momentum immanent in the episodes which together comprise the Existential Medium including man. God's activities—the retention of the stable and the modification of existing episodes—are discoverable within episodes at all levels. (ii). In terms of Relation, God may be considered compresent, engaged with and implicated in all that occurs, the repetitive as well as the creative and/or destructive, directly in terms of quality and indirectly in terms of generically One but operationally many. (iii). God's operations or activities function within episodes with directionality dominant over randomness. The outcomes of these activities appear in a persistent succession of culminations which are more or less temporary.¹⁶

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 29.

OPERATIONALISM AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION

Will Bernardt's concept of God fit in at all with traditional theological and religious thinking? Not without some modification, of course. He sees Judaeo-Christianity as a result of man's attempt to humanize an impersonal universe in terms of the father image and the pleasure principle as explained by Freud. This provided men with a God they could approach on human terms and provided them with a sense of security and importance otherwise impossible in a universe in which humankind is such an infinitesimal part.

The same could be said of Christian Existentialism which tends to put man at the center of the universe and stress human subjectivity as the only real source of the knowledge of God. All other aspects of the existential medium are irrelevant with regard to man's religious quest. These other aspects may well be investigated by the sciences, but they have no real value either for the understanding of man or God. It is clear that such an attitude is directly opposed to Bernhardt's Operationalism. From his viewpoint, a theistic view of life would be much more pertinent, if one used it to enable him to live more serenely and more reasonably in a universe not made particularly for man.

The God that emerges out of Bernhardt's investigation is a power which is relative and finitely operative in the existential medium and in man. This power is immanent to that medium and in no way transcends it. While, as far as I know, he does not deny that such a power is personal, he never affirms personality of it. His view seems to be that, since personality is such a small factor in the long history of directional momentum, it is not worth predicating of God. This directional momentum operates selectively; it seems to be superior to randomness and chance; yet it is neither absolute nor omnipotent. To speak of this power in human terms is to anthropomorphize it and to commit the prideful error of likening it to man. As has been mentioned, man is at best an infinitesimal part of a universe that is by and large impersonal, inconstant, and finitely operative in space and time.

The acceptance of such a God is hardly palatable to the ordinary religious view. Such a God is not at all consistent with the God taught by traditional theism, Christian or otherwise. Much of the traditional view of God will simply have to be given up. On the other hand, Bernhardt thinks that the Operationalist view will force the individual and the group to live more realistically in a situation which has its unmanipulative factors, whether we like it or not. Man is given less chance to look to another realm for the solution to his problems, or to a father image or a personal Savior to rescue him from his sins, his guilt,

and his inadequacy. The responsibility is put on man himself to make this a better world, to participate in saving himself and his society, and to accepting with religious equanimity what he cannot change.

CONCLUSION

What is interesting about Bernhardt's approach is that he is able to define an objectively "real" God starting from Dewey's non-theistic naturalism. Such a God, viewed as dynamic directionality, may be little better than the glue holding the process together; but to some extent Bernhardt does make a metaphysician out of Dewey. Those who understand metaphysics as an investigation of being will not find Bernhardt's use of the term very acceptable. They will argue that it is precisely because neither Dewey nor Bernhardt is willing to speak of being, that they condemn themselves to equate the real with the finite, the temporal, and that which is either directly or indirectly verifiable. Bernhardt himself admits that for him to be is to be temporal. From such presuppositions the conclusions are hardly surprising.

Yet it is also true that Bernhardt is willing to admit the validity of an inferential conclusion based on evidence and to admit also indirect verifiability. This can provide the possibility, at least, for an escape from Dewey's complete scientific naturalism. It does not appear to me that Bernhardt himself is able to make such an escape. He is too fond of identifying any religious or metaphysical approach which asserts an absolute as a closed system. One could just as easily argue that the naturalistic presupposition that one can think only in terms of the finite, the temporal, and the somehow-or-other-experienceable is itself an arbitrary closing off of the possibility to think in any other terms. The assertion, too, that there are and can be no absolutes comes too close to being an absolute itself to be readily acceptable. There is also in Bernhardt, as in Dewey, the tendency to regard all metaphysics as idealistic and conceptualistic systems after the manner of Descartes and Hegel.

It is true, of course, that there is little value in holding on to an absolute God, if He is merely a being created by man after his own image. But it is also true that many reputable thinkers have affirmed an absolute, omnipotent, personal God on metaphysical as well as religious reasoning. Perhaps the best that can be said of Bernhardt is that he seems to have taken St. Paul's assertion seriously; e.g., that one can know there is a God by looking at the things that are. This is more than Dewey was ever able to accomplish. In trying to conceptualize that God, however, Bernhardt is necessarily limited by a methodology whose categories are all derived from a naturalistic context.

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