

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Classical Apologetics

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R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984.

This book is divided, not sharply, for each part somewhat overlaps the others in subject matter, but nevertheless is divided into two parts. The first defends the cosmological argument for the existence of God, an argument which, as in Thomas Aquinas, makes no appeal to the Bible; the second is largely a critique of Van Til's presuppositionalism, including some material from his disciples, with only a page or two—well, maybe six or eight—on distinctly different forms.

This summary is of course extremely brief and is far from giving any adequate picture of the whole book. But the critic thinks it is fair enough for an initial statement.

One other remark is necessary. When the wording of the paragraph is "All presuppositionalists hold," or simply "Presuppositionalism holds that..." one is inclined to object to an unwarranted generalization. However, rather than charging the authors with repeated logical blunders, let it be set down to careless English. Unless they explicitly say otherwise, they mean Van Til's theory.

The first subject then is the cosmological argument. Considering a section in Plato's lengthy *Laws* as a premature birth from an octogenarian, we may well

consider Aristotle as its initiator. It is essentially the argument of Books II to VIII of Aristotle's *Physics*. Book VIII completes the preparation and concludes with the Unmoved Mover. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century reproduced it without any significant change. Its summary may be found in *Thales to Dewey* (274-275) with what the author considers to be devastating objections.

Now, the three authors introduce their work with an all too short but really excellent description of the intellectual—or better, the anti-intellectual and anti-Christian—forces of the twentieth century. The next three chapters present certain material that the authors think they can and do accept from the Bible. This chapter belongs to the second part of their book. The critic prefers to begin his work with the traditional, purely secular cosmological argument, since the authors appeal to it later on.

On page 72, and in spite of their antipathy toward presuppositionalism, they list three of their own. First, the validity of the law of non-contradiction. Second, the validity of the law of causality. And third, the basic reliability of sense perception. On the same page they then admit: "Though we assert that these assumptions are virtually universal, they by no means enjoy universal assent. [But] no one denies these principles regularly and consistently."

Just how much of a face-saving device the term *consistently* may be, it is not true that "no one denies these principles regularly." At any rate they must bear the burden of proving the alleged

inconsistency, and this they do not do. In fact, they repeat their assertion without this weasel word.

On page 82 they bluntly say, "Causal thinking is an integral part of all scientific examination." This statement must be branded as utterly false. It is such a blunder that although one instance would refute it, a number of instances may be necessary to convince a reluctant reader. And the point is so fundamental to the authors' positions that no loopholes should be left.

In 1893, almost a century ago, C. S. Peirce wrote, "We still talk about 'cause and effect,' although in a mechanical world, the opinion this phrase was meant to express has been shelved long ago" (*Philosophical Works*, 17).¹

In addition to Peirce, Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World*, chapter XIV, tries to salvage *causation* at the expense of *causality*. He calls the law of gravitation "a mere truism" (299). *Exploring the Universe*, contributions of numerous authors, edited by Louise B. Young, McGraw Hill, 1963, on page 200 has this to say: "Before the quantum theory appeared, the principle of the uniformity of nature... had been accepted as a universal and indisputable fact of science. As soon as the atomicity of radiation became established, this principle had to be discarded."

Finally, to clinch the matter, two more quotations will be made: one by the three authors, the other by one of the best known and most highly regarded scientists of the very recent past. The authors assert, "There is no science ...which is not heavily involved with causal thinking." This statement is false. The evidence is conclusive.

Erwin Schroedinger, of world renown, asserts that no scientific model can ever be true, one reason for which is the impossibility of identifying a particle as the same one the scientist saw or thought he saw a tenth of a second before. "We must not admit the possibility of continuous observation."²

Now comes a most startling bit of information: Jonathan Edwards anticipated Schroedinger and completed the explanation, as Schroedinger could not! Our three authors list Jonathan Edwards as one

who exemplifies their notion of classical apologetics. Since today few people know much about Edwards, it is not too surprising that these three authors do not mention the matter. They are not deliberately trying to deceive the public by omission: They simply do not know what Edwards said on this point. The section is in the treatise *On Original Sin* (Baines edition, 1807, Vol. II, 350ff). At the beginning of these several pages, one too quickly concludes that Edwards and the authors agree. But very soon, speaking first of the moon, Edwards says, "In point of *time* [italics his] what is *past* [italics his] *entirely* [italics mine] ceases when *present* [his] existence begins.... The present existence ... of ... any other created substance cannot be an effect of its past existence.... Therefore the existence of created substances, in each successive moment, must be the *immediate* [Edwards' own italics] agency, will, and power of God." This view is commonly called continuous creation, though discontinuous creation would be a better name because there are temporal gaps between what sensation takes as different positions of the same thing.

Admittedly Edwards, because of the originality of his idea, continued with phraseology to which our three authors would not object. But yet he speaks of "God's ...causing [a thing's] existence in each successive moment [as] altogether equivalent to an *immediate production out of nothing* [italics his] God produces as much from *nothing* [italics his] as if there had been nothing before" (355). They should study his footnote on the moon and images in a mirror.

There is a better, more easily understood, and almost universally known example in this twentieth century. At the movies we see, we really *see* a man or an airplane in motion. But there is nothing on the screen that moves. The man appears at a given spot; then he vanishes from the screen so quickly that the audience is unaware of it; then another picture flashes on at nearly the same spot. This produces the illusion of motion. But nothing moves, and second picture is not the same thing as the first. In the case of motion at least, sensation is always mistaken. Indeed, even when the gentleman on the

screen seems to stand still, it is not the same gentleman who was on the screen a moment before.

Our three authors acknowledge that sensation is at least sometimes mistaken, but they put their faith—they are fideists—in a "basic or rudimentary reliability of sense perception" (87). But they certainly do not give the reader any criterion by which to distinguish a truthful sensation from a false one. And of course they steer clear of the motion picture illustration that all sensations are deceptive, or that they are discontinuous, or that Schroedinger is a good scientist.

Quai cum ita sint, they arbitrarily choose which sensations they prefer to believe and discard the others.

As any drowsy reader can guess, the critic believes that these arguments have completely demolished the theory under scrutiny. However, and although one can ignore the false generalizations about all presuppositionalists when they do not even know them all, there are several types of fallacies—and even clearly false statements—which should be sampled if one wishes to get a more nearly complete picture of the book.

First, some of the ambiguities will be examined. We shall begin with the term *cause*. On page 110: "the first question we ask of those who attack causality is, why? What is the reason for or the cause of the attack on cause? There must be a cause for the denial of cause." This merry-go-round continues for a page or two. The ambiguity and confusion, in the quotation, first appears in the word "why," and second in "the reason for or the cause of," and third in the phrase "a cause for the denial of cause." This is a confusion between alleged physical causes and logical implication. One may say that a building collapsed because someone placed a bomb in it. One may also say that Socrates is mortal because he is a man. But the first *because* is a case of alleged physical causation and the second is a case of logical implication. One *why* asks for a reason; the other asks for a bomb. This explodes the authors' confusion and ambiguity.

Perhaps the authors or a reader will ask, Is not God the cause of the world? In the sense intended the

answer is a resounding, No! God is not a physical body that sets another physical body in motion by contact. God creates, *ex nihilo*. The common assertion that God is the First Cause is not going out of style very soon, but the meaning of the word as thus used cannot be inserted into any cosmological argument so as to lift it into the stratosphere.

In order to avoid the reply that this item of cause is only one ambiguity and can therefore be pardoned, even if it is destructive of the most important points in the authors' theory, it may be well to mention a second. The words now are not *cause* but *above* and *below*. Page 217 argues, "absurd as it may be for us who are here below to begin with where we are not—above—Van Til insists that this must be done." The authors seem to think that arguments begin in some locality: Either they start in a valley and ascend to the mountain peak, or vice versa. The relation of axioms to theorems escapes them. Pythagoras and Euclid did not begin geometry in Africa or Tarentum. Geometry begins in the axiom that through a given point (3/8 inches in diameter?) only one straight line (1/4 inch broad?) can be drawn parallel to a given line. The point is that no one has ever seen a point. "Here below" and "where we are not—above" are such horrendous examples of ambiguity that no others are needed.

The next set of examples is false statements. When we accuse the authors of making false statements, we must make it perfectly clear that we do not accuse them of intending to deceive. If we dare guess at motivation, the guess would be that they are over enthusiastic, that their generalizations are too broad, or that their language is imprecise. In several cases a more carefully worded sentence would have been true. But the critic must take them precisely as they are.

Right at the beginning, on page ix of the Preface, there is a statement that many would accept as true. Its last two words, however, make it false: "Christianity is rational. But... that Christianity involves more, much more, than rationality, is evident." Well, it is not evident to the critic. Even its meaning, let alone its truth, is not evident. Does it mean that though the study of theology is rational, moral behavior is not rational? Then too, the scope

of the phrase "much more" is far from evident. Kind readers, do not dismiss this as triviality. There is so much unsupported assertion in the book that it is a major flaw.

Perhaps it is only repetition to list the following as a false statement. On page 72, speaking both of causation and the basic reliability of sensation, the authors assert that "no one denies these principles regularly and consistently." To say that *no one* denies them is preposterous: The authors have not questioned all the world's population. Nor even with the weasel word *consistently* have they demonstrated the inconsistency of a hundred scientists.

Another one of these nasty little false statements comes on page 212. The authors say, "We consider it self-evident that [apologetics] must start with the person who is making the intellectual journey." No doubt this is completely true, for they merely say "We consider it" so. However, read on. "One simply cannot start outside himself... From time immemorial all [!] people have assumed that they must begin their thinking with themselves." But it is well-nigh incredible that any person should make such an egregiously absurd claim. First, no one has ever interviewed "all people" to determine this alleged fact. Even if all people, including the Tibetans of the fourth century B.C. did so, it does not follow that they assumed they must have done so. Second, neither Parmenides nor Spinoza did so (Spinoza began with eight definitions and seven axioms). No more than Euclid—who began with "Any line may be divided into two parts"—did either of them begin or end with himself. Indeed, the problem has nothing to do with how Euclid began. Maybe he began shooting marbles when he was four years of age, or drinking his mother's milk from birth. The problem is, How does geometry or philosophy begin? Thomas Aquinas did not begin the cosmological argument by making mud pies in the castle of Roccasecca or the town of Aquino. He or it began with the alleged fact that a body moves, or that one can see a body move. Who sees it is of no importance. If the authors want a temporal beginning instead of a logical beginning, why do they not choose his conception in his mother's womb?

Equal confusion continues on the next page (213). The authors state, "Non-Christians cannot use reason and logic to 'keep down the truth.' They have to violate them." Again this is a false statement. Non-Christians do not *have* to violate logic. Many of their arguments are perfectly valid. The Christian rejects the arguments, or should do so, not because of their alleged invalidity, but because of their anti-Christian presuppositions. A valid argument can consist of three true sentences, three false sentences, or two false premises and a true conclusion. The only thing a valid argument cannot have is two true premises and a false conclusion. Accordingly, we charge that the authors' assertion is untrue.

This lethal litany of linguistic laxity must have left the learner either languid or livid. Hence only one more criticism, but important enough to serve as a conclusion.

Beginning on page 29 there is a section on Kant's Copernican Revolution. Concerning Kant the authors say, "Kant declared intellectual independence of God, ... humans cannot know him even partially ... human knowledge only extends to the world's phenomena and not the noumenal realm." The authors also make some remarks about Kant's intuitions of time and space and also about his twelve categories. Their statements are as correct as one could expect in a short summary.

The next point in this concluding criticism is that the authors reject empiricism. "An epistemology established upon a naked empiricism is doomed ... not a single datum can be discovered without an *a priori* making discrimination and individuation possible.... Without *a priori* equipment such as Kant's pure intuitions of space and time ...sensations cannot give rise to perceptions" (85). The authors are not so clear on Kant's categories as they are on his intuitions. Though obviously they accept causality, they say very little about the other eleven. But a satisfactory epistemology requires at least more than one. Kant listed unity, plurality, totality, subsistence, reciprocity, to complete a set of twelve.

However, it is now clear that for them knowledge is a combination of sensory intuitions and *a priori* categories. Consistency requires them to say that categories without intuitions are empty and intuitions without categories are blind. This means that they are essentially Kantians. And if so, causality is restricted to sensory material and has no application to the noumenal world. The cosmological argument therefore is a fallacy and God is no more than a heuristic principle.

a particle, not as a permanent entity, but as an instantaneous event." "Causality and Wave Mechanics" in *The World of Mathematics*, Vol. II, 1056. Compare also Arthur Eddington, "The New Law of Gravitation," 1094.

Every philosophic or theological system must begin somewhere, for if it did not begin it could not continue. But a beginning cannot be preceded by anything else, or it would not be the beginning. Therefore every system must be based on presuppositions or axioms. They may be Spinoza's axioms; they may be Locke's sensory starting point, or whatever. Every system must therefore be presuppositional.

The first principle cannot be demonstrated because there is nothing prior from which to deduce it. Call it presuppositionalism, call it fideism, names do not matter. But I know no better presupposition than "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the word of God written, and therefore inerrant in the autographs."

1. Compare also the critic's article "The Nature of the Physical Universe," in *Christian Faith and Modern Philosophy*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry, 1964.

2. For those who do not find science so tedious and to spare the others, this endnote will give the pertinent quotation. "As our mental eye penetrates into smaller and smaller distances and shorter and shorter times, we find nature behaving so entirely differently from our surrounding that *no* model shaped after our large scale experience can ever be true ... not even thinkable.... If I observe a particle here and now and observe a similar one a moment later at a place very near the former place, not only cannot I be sure whether it is the 'same', but this statement has absolutely no meaning.... *We must not admit the possibility of continuous observation* [italics his]. Observations are to be regarded as discrete disconnected events.... It is better to regard