

# THE PEACEFUL INTELLECTUALIST LIBERATION FROM LOGIC

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## 1. What sort of liberation?

**I**F WE TRY TO assess western intellectual life over the centuries, there are reasonable grounds for the view that we are at the beginning of an era in which there are great opportunities for a liberation of the intellect. For nearly four centuries our intellectual life has been dominated by what is known as rationalism, and many aspects of this domination or oppression were accepted even by those who thought they were reacting against it. And the great instrument of the rationalist was logic, so we who are Catholic theologians and philosophers experienced this oppression when we were irritated by, or grumbled at, or laughed over, our panoply of, syllogisms, theses, definitions, propositions, concepts, distinctions and proofs.

I stress that our liberation from this yoke of logic can be, and should be, a peaceful one, since the liberator stands in need of collaboration with his former oppressor, and can be freed without working for his destruction. The liberator can put the oppressor in his place and restore him to his rightful function. Indeed, in doing so he can liberate logic itself, by restoring to it the genuine source of its own power. And this applies to the much more powerful weapon of modern symbolic logic, as well as to the traditional logic and logical apparatus that we knew in our seminary classes and our text books.

Those who have already reacted against such logical bonds might be surprised or mistrustful at my call to an intellectualist liberation, since the most prominent revolts against logic have been directed also against intellectualism. Such revolts have called upon the will or the emotions or religious piety, but it is my contention that in the long run they do not achieve a genuine liberation. At the same time the attacks they make upon reason and logic do no serious harm to a philosophy that makes its basic stand on the human intellect and its activities of inquiry and understanding. The justification for such revolts lies in the validity of their complaints against logicism, extrinsicism, conceptualism, but their ultimate inefficacy lies in the bluntness of their attack and nebulousness of the ruler they substitute for the former tyrant.

## 2. Some intellectualist theses

2.1 I will start by stating in an extreme and negative form a number of theses that I hold, which are as strong, I think, as much that was said by Kierkegaard or Nietzsche. Later I will state by position in a complementary, but much more positive form. This first set of theses is possible because the rationalists and conceptualists overstated their claims on behalf of logic and each of their claims has to be denied if we are to arrive at a healthy and fruitful use of reason. Of course, when the overstatement is removed their claims can be qualified and moderated and taken in a human way. But as soon as that is done the philosopher who makes concepts and propositions and first principles central must lose his bearings. Each claim neglected central intellectual power which is required if these logical instruments are to be activated. But it is time I got down to business. My first set of theses are as follows:

2.11 First principles are not first, and are not principles.

- 2.12 Syllogisms do not prove anything.
- 2.13 A definition does not make anything clear.
- 2.14 A proposition is not in a sentence.
- 2.15 Even mathematical or logical proofs do not force assent.
- 2.16 Method does not achieve progress.
- 2.17 A distinction does not resolve a difficulty.
- 2.18 A logical system cannot be complete.

2.2 *Peaceful collaboration with the reformed oppressor.* Before attempting to defend or explain any of these positions, I would like to put my intellectualist theses in a more positive form, allowing a place for logic, as follows:

- 2.21 First principles are formulations of the power of the intellect, which is the basic principle and is ultimate for us.
- 2.22 First principles are true and convincing, and outline boundaries to genuine and healthy inquiry.
- 2.23 A syllogism sets out a proof, giving some permanence to it for its discoverer, and a means which can help him to communicate the proof to others.
- 2.24 A definition is a careful expression of an insight and a great help to accuracy in communication. But the clarity belongs to the insight and is lacking without it. And the primary insight is into data rather than words.
- 2.25 A proposition is in the mind of the speaker. It can be in the mind of the hearer if he discovers it for himself. A sentence is a set of hints which may help him to discover the proposition.
- 2.26 Proofs present evidence. But the mind has to be active in an appropriate way and using its own resources before it can grasp the evidence and appreciate its sufficiency.
- 2.27 Where a source of growth is present, method helps it to be orderly, and so to be fruitful and cumulative and reliable.
- 2.28 A distinction is a help to the liberation of understanding since each closes the way to a misunderstanding.
- 2.29 A logical system sustains and protects growth.

### **3. The basic characteristics of intellectualism as opposed to conceptualism**

3.1 A personal conscious act of understanding comes before concepts or propositions, not after them.

- 3.11 It is the source of all concepts and propositions, and also of logic and method, and consciously so.
- 3.12 It is based on data, but is an enrichment of data. The data include all sensations and also the consciousness that accompanies all our waking activities.
- 3.13 The internal source of understanding is wonder, inquiry, questioning, the desire to know, which are synonymous with the *intellectus agens*.
- 3.14 Understanding is primarily into a particular thing or event.

3.2 Why was this priority of understanding to concepts missed by so many philosophers?

- 3.21 The commonest case of understanding is of words and sentences. And so it is taken to be the basic sort of understanding. And, since words represent

concepts, and sentences represent propositions, it seems that we get the concepts first through the words and then understand them.

3.211 But the understanding of words is not basic, as is shown negatively by the fact that we do not understand foreign languages, and positively by the fact that we do understand puzzles and machines and then start formulating concepts to express our understanding.

3.2111 Note that foreign languages are learnt more easily by applying their words to pictures of real life rather than by translating words into words.

3.22 Invention, discovery, insight, artistic inspiration, are thought to be rare and mysterious, because we haven't been trained to identify them. But we could be so trained (This would give us familiarity with what Lonergan calls the realm of interiority).

3.23 When a dynamism *is* recognised, it is easily ascribed to the will or the emotions, because we *have* been trained to recognise these.

3.3 Learning to identify acts of understanding.

3.31 In oneself.

3.111 Make sure to examine *fresh* insights, and examine them as soon as possible after they have become new discoveries or inventions for us.

3.1111 Normally we are strongly attracted away from such examination of ourselves and our own activity, because the content of the discovery is interesting and so we concentrate on the problem that has been solved and on further ramifications of the discovery.

3.312 A joke is a good exercise to start with. It works precisely because we thought we understood it, and then find that we have to understand it in another and an unexpected way. This is a new and sudden discovery.

3.3121 Puzzles also are useful exercises. But if we remember to ask about what we are doing we will find many fresh discoveries in our ordinary work and conversation.

3.32 In others. Though we can never experience their discovery directly, we can observe signs that accompany a discovery in ourselves — namely, an ability to reformulate our fresh understanding in a number of different ways instead of repeating the first expression parrot-wise; an ability to apply the insight to the solution of problems; and a facility in thinking up examples and illustrations that help to convey the same point. Such signs are often observable in other people too. So we can have good grounds for holding that they too are making discoveries, i.e. arriving at new understanding.

3.33 In accounts that people have given of this experience.

3.331 When Washington Platt and Ross A. Baker sent a questionnaire to "American Men of Science" asking whether they had "ever received assistance from the scientific revelation or hunch in the solution of an important problem", 33% of the 232 who replied said "frequently" and another 50% said "occasionally". The many accounts of such experiences that they published in the *Journal of Chemical Education* (vol. 8, October, 1931, pp. 1969-2002) show that the experience was very vivid in the scientist's consciousness, even when much subsequent work was required for its formulation. Eliot Dole Hutchinson gives many similar accounts in *Psychiatry* 2, (1939) 323-332. For instance a physicist says "Nearly all important ideas come quick as a flash, faster than they can be expressed in words; but always after long gathering and analysis of data and usually after considerable unsuccessful thought" (392).

3.4 There is a similar personal conscious activity of assessing the evidence for any proposition, and this activity should be at the basis of each genuine assent.

3.41 The evidence need not be in the form of propositions, but can be raw data.

3.42 This power of judging corresponds to what Newman called our "illative sense" (*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, 1870, Chapters 8 and 9). Its effective exercise requires familiarity with the field of data concerned, and so occurs more frequently in matters that are considered to belong to common sense. But it is the goal, too, of all attempts at verification within the natural sciences. These attempts at verification of some hypothesis rarely proceed in a simple logical manner but range over all manner of data, and ultimately rely on a personal acceptance of intellectual responsibility for a judgment.

#### 4. Opportunities for a richer philosophy

4.1 There is room for a great variety of theses, with the result that we are not limited to the traditional theses of the text-books. New questions can arise and new discoveries can be made. Almost every subject has great potential for growth.

4.2 We are not tied to the standard definitions, but can give a good deal of freshness to our thought by striving to understand more fully the matter concerned, and then formulating definitions in our own words. Probably the first inkling I had of the power of this preconceptual way of thinking occurred over twenty years ago, when I was browsing through Bonaventure and was amazed at the freshness and brevity of a whole set of definitions he gave that had obviously sprung directly from his own grasp of the relevant issues.

4.3 Proofs can be adapted to the needs of specific audiences, since a proof can never be a full statement of all the evidence, but is a selection of elements that have not sufficiently engaged the attention of the audience to which the proof is directed.

4.4 The search for "first principles" ceases to be limited to a straining after a few very special self-evident axioms from which all useful knowledge can be deduced, since the number of possible first principles is enormously multiplied. Any principle can be called "first" if it is not deduced from other propositions and has been produced as a formulation of the speaker's own insight and responsibly assented to on the basis of the data available to him. And this can happen in scientific matters or in the common sense affairs of ordinary life, or in the basic reflections of philosophy quite as much as in the more static and empty field of necessary logic.

4.5 Room is opened for moving towards some reconciliation of the specialised branches of knowledge into which serious studies have become fragmented in our time. No subject works itself out or grows automatically in a book. Once it is recognised that all knowledge is generated in a human mind an affinity between such subjects as economics and physics and theology becomes apparent, since each depends basically on acts of understanding and acts of judging and all acts of understanding have a similarity with which we are familiar in our conscious experience once we have been trained to advert to it.

4.6 The concrete and the particular can be approached directly and we can sometimes succeed in understanding it, without, as conceptualists have taught, having to go through laws that had to be known and formulated previously. So a

good coach can understand what is happening in the football match he is watching, without all the time trying to subsume each movement under some well known general law.

4.7 There is an enormous change in the criterion of reality which leads us to a new understanding of the meaning of reality itself. The naive view that reality is what is given to us directly through the senses has never been able to deal satisfactorily with the common facts of optical and other illusions, and people have always recognised it in their readiness to take another look and to ask a series of further questions, guided by the over-riding question, "But is it really so?" We find that they are demanding something that can stand up to persistent and intelligent questioning, that they often find something of this nature after judicious investigation, and that at that stage they are ready to apply the term "real" in its full strength to what they have found. So reality has to be sought by our spiritual powers, not just through the senses, far less through one exercise of one of the senses.

4.71 This makes it much easier for us to realise that there can be realities that are themselves spiritual.

## 5. Openings for theology

5.1 Catholic theology has been hobbled over the last century or so by taking for granted the conceptualistic view that theology consists in making deductions from some proposition or pair of propositions taken directly from sacred scripture. This has left very little room for growth, and hardly needs to be pointed out in these days after Vatican II.

5.11 What is not so widely recognised is the fact that there is hardly any more fertility in a romantic or pietistic revolt against such deductivism. The only solution lies in a liberation that returns from the concept to the act of understanding and then fosters collaboration between these.

5.2 On the intellectualist view theology becomes the attempt to understand what we have received in revelation. It does not take it for granted that some sentences in scripture are obvious and fully understood, but compares passage with passage and takes context into consideration, and anticipates development and probes with new questions. In this process all the modern techniques for studying a text, or a living culture of the past or the present, or a concrete group or society, can be brought into action. Understanding never occurs automatically, but when it occurs the theologian is in a position to give a fresh account of something that was communicated to us by the life and words of Jesus Christ. The result can be variety, deeper penetration, wider synthesis, greater flexibility without loss of solidity.

5.21 While revision and correction remains a necessary part of serious study in any field, the vitality of new offerings made available by this sort of theology would soon make it clear that a hypercritical examination of past achievements together with a desire to reject whatever we fail to fit into a simple secularist model can hardly merit any longer the name of "progressive" theology.

5.3 Despite the pietistic view of Thomas a' Kempis that "I had rather feel compunction than know how to define it", theology becomes compatible with simple piety and with a religious spirit and a genuinely complementary activity. And it now has a way of drawing its nourishment from piety and from an investigation of the piety of others.

5.31 As an example I think that a case can be made for interpreting the doctrine of transignification as a valuable theological expression of the simple piety that fostered personal adoration and prayer to Jesus in the tabernacle, whereas the tendency to reject transubstantiation at the same time belonged to the view that progress consists in change rather than in growth.

## 6. Help in some theological issues concerning the mind itself

Let us turn from an examination of the nature of theology to some more particular theological issues, and it is appropriate to consider a few that deal with the mind of man or God.

6.1 Bertrand Russell's knock-out question "But who made God?" loses its force when we realise that we asked "Who made the world?" only in order to understand the world, that the existence of a powerful intelligent being can help towards such understanding, and that the question "Who made God?" simply does not arise in the same reasonable quest as long as we ascribe self-understanding to this being as one of his essential powers.

6.2 Despite the strong conviction of theologians over the centuries that Christ must have possessed the beatific vision in his human mind from the first moment of his conception, some theologians in recent years have considered rejecting this on the grounds that it would interfere with a genuine learning process in his human intellect as he grew up and as he developed his apostolic work. This is particularly the case if we think of the beatific vision as something like the possession of one large concept, containing a whole series of other concepts ready-formed. But the difficulty is overcome if we take the beatific vision to be a single ineffable act of understanding. Being a supernatural gift, it has not arisen through concepts or with the help of words or images, and so it remains ineffable, unspeakable, in the sense of not having at hand any concepts, propositions, words or sensations that could be used to give it expression on the ordinary human level. It is therefore quite unable to interfere with the normal processes of discovery and learning, and it comes into contact with these processes only by occasionally recognising as authoritative an expression, a parable, or a plan, which the natural intellect has managed to think up in the course of a prayerful struggle to inquire into the meaning of scripture, the lives of men, and the plants and birds in the world around.

6.21 The lack of interference of the beatific vision with the natural intellect can be compared to the lack of interference of ordinary understanding with the exercise of the senses. A man who understands how a motor car works is no less able to see and feel and hear it than a man who knows nothing of such things. When looking he will notice more parts than the other, when listening he will hearken to more variations in the sounds. Though the seeing and hearing are enhanced, they are in no way replaced, and they remain perfectly genuine acts of seeing and hearing.

6.3 Actual graces have often been spoken of as lights and inspirations in the human mind. Our ordinary inventions, discoveries, insights, are often similarly called lights or illuminations. One characteristic of an insight is that it can never be predicted. We can ask pertinent questions, examine the data minutely and investigate persistently without any success, and then perhaps the insight will come at some unexpected moment. We don't know its source. There is no reason why some insights may not have a supernatural origin. If so, we can never be sure which ones they are. If we are taught from revelation that there are some graces that result in learning, then it is quite possible that these insights are in fact some

of these graced insights. They will be conscious activations of the mind, but there will be no conscious indiation of their supernatural origin or nature:

- 6.31 A similar account can be given of an inspiration as a new conscious readiness to choose what is good. And this could apply to each of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. They can enter into our conscious life, even though we can never be certain as to what they are.
- 6.32 It might even be possible to extend this account so that it could apply to sanctifying grace. We can never be sure that we are in a state of grace. But this does not prevent the state of grace involving a conscious love of God and readiness for religious things.

6.4 The notion of sacrifice is one that we are not altogether happy with today. The death of Christ on the cross can in some way be spoken of as a sacrifice, but the Eucharist seems to be just a symbol of the cross or the remembrance of what was once a sacrificial meal. Taking a clue from the repeated warnings of the Old Testament, however, we can conceive of every sacrifice as above all a spiritual reality. The most important element in Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the sacrificial spirit of Christ, his adoration and love for his Father, his detestation of sin, his spirit of gratitude, his obedience and desire to offer himself fully to his Father. Since "no man has greater love than that he lay down his life for his friends", the death that was offered to Him was a most appropriate symbol of this sacrificial spirit, this very core of sacrifice, this absolutely complete offering of self. Christ did nothing to cause that death, but accepted it when it came. This external event became his symbol, his expression, of what was internal and spiritual. The Mass, then, is clearly a symbol of the cross, and therefore symbolises all that the cross itself symbolises. It is linked almost as closely as the cross itself to the sacrificial spirit, which is the very essence of sacrifice.

When we keep logic in its place, but keep it nevertheless, we can discover a dynamism of the intellect that is as lively as any dynamism of the will, and at the same time throws light onto much that would otherwise be in shadow. And we gain scope for advances in theology that are not subversive of the achievements of the past.