

PLURALISTIC BASES OF ONTOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

by

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DISCUSSION PAPER

on

Robert P. Scharlemann's
ONTOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASES OF PLURALISM

The Fourteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Houston, Texas November 28-December 1, 1985

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There are many points worth commenting on in Professor Scharlemann's paper, "Ontological and Theological Bases of Pluralism." Space does not permit me to do so, however. What I shall try to do is to outline what I take to be the central argument of his paper and critique its major presuppositions. In so doing I shall argue that Scharlemann's defense of Tillich's principle of creative standpoint is a good one but that he fails to consider his own position under the criteria he espouses. This is particularly true in his treatment of the empirical sciences in contrast to the influence of the normative system he proposes.

The first part of Scharlemann's paper is commendable in that he argues for the establishment of community rather than unity (in the sense of uniformity of belief) as the attainable human ideal. Community presupposes a diverse plurality of subjects; unity would strive to destroy it. Thus, the establishment of the ontological basis of subjective plurality is essential both to the refutation of unity and as the precondition for community. But subjective plurality is not sufficient to establish community, only necessary. Hence some other principle must be invoked to bring subjective plurality into true community. Scharlemann briefly suggests that Buber's concept of

"betweenness" may be helpful here but goes on to argue more fully for the world community building potential of Tillich's principle of "creative standpoint." In so doing, however, he adopts many positions which would, I think, hinder rather than advance this admirable goal.

Part of the difficulty might be illumined by considering Buber's concept of "betweenness" as a solution to the problem of balancing individualism and collectivism. Individualism, Scharlemann notes, sacrifices the whole to the part, while collectivism sacrifices the part for the whole. A free community is impossible under these conditions; it is possible "only where the part and the whole are simultaneously fulfilled by relation to this element that is between all members."(p.6) But what is it that is "between" all members? Might it not be just as appropriate to say that the part and the whole are simultaneously *sacrificed* to that which lies between them? I cannot help but be reminded of the lines from a song from "My Fair Lady" regarding the compromise of desires in marriage: "Rather than do either they go out and do what neither wants to do at all." Unfortunately what often lies between individuals is anything but community building. Even more tragically, the constructive force that lies between two or more individuals binding them to one another is as often as not precisely that which lies between them and another as a destructive force of alienation. Such are the weaknesses of human insecurity and jealousy. It is these which must be overcome if true human community is to be possible.

Nonetheless, since pluralism is a necessary precondition for community, Scharlemann sets out in a fashion resembling the famous (or infamous) "Ontological Argument" to demonstrate that not only is subjective plurality an empirically historical fact but an ontological necessity. In so doing however, he does not take into account the creative standpoint which would hold that empirical fact *is* ontologically decisive, or that his own position is merely an alternative creative standpoint.

Does his argument work? The argument for subjective pluralism is fashioned, *mutatis mutandis*, on the traditional argument for the subject-object distinction in the epistemic event--that one must presuppose the distinction in order to deny it. Hence he argues that one can deny subjective plurality only at the cost of contradiction.

Suppose, therefore, that I do assert: "Plurality (subject and other-subject) is not part of the ontological structure." Must I be or be related to, another subject as I make that denial? Clearly, yes, if the denial is one actually made and if it makes any sense as a denial. (p. 13)

Even Scharlemann himself admits that this is not quite so clear as the words "Clearly, yes" suggest. Perhaps it is not so clear because the logical necessity he wishes for simply isn't there.

First, what sense is there to asking: "Must I be...another subject...?" How can *I* be another subject? Such a notion is patently absurd--a logical contradiction--its

opposite a logical necessity. Second, why logically must there be another subject in order for the modality of propositional affirmation/denial to make sense? It is the fundamental principle of skepticism that both the affirmation and denial of a proposition be held balanced in the skeptic's mind. This does not presuppose a plurality of subjects. And, what about the solipsistic schizophrenic who frequently engages him/herself in violent debate? Perhaps these counter examples will be dismissed on the grounds that they do not constitute a denial "actually made" or that they really don't "make any sense" as denials. But to do so is to render the entire argument a *petitio principii*. Perhaps, God forbid, God is just such a solipsistic schizophrenic personality, although that is not a creative standpoint I would wish to defend.

The argument for the theological basis of pluralism is even more severely flawed. To say that there is no free response [to a religious symbol] without the possibility of an opposite response (p.14) does not necessitate that there be another subject who has the opposite response. A single subject can recognize the possibility of various responses to the significance of a religious symbol without the necessity of other subjects actually making them. What is more, the possibilities are not just those of positive response or rejection as in propositional affirmation/denial, but also sheer meaninglessness. For the empiricist it is enough that there is in fact such a plurality of responses to establish the ontological significance of

subjective pluralism. For Scharlemann this does not seem adequate. Yet he has failed to demonstrate their logical necessity.

Whether established by empirical fact or logical necessity the attempt to resolve subjective pluralism into a constructive community through the recognition that all normative positions are "creative standpoints" is a laudable one. My only critique of Scharlemann's suggestions in this regard is that by ignoring the symbolic character of the empirical sciences he fails to see a truly world-community building force but opts for a somewhat religiously provincial symbolism instead.

His choice of the "symbol of the cross" as "the second-order symbol which symbolizes the symbolic character of all symbols" (p.24) is, I think, unfortunate. First, it is not at all clear that this will necessarily have the world community building potential for which Scharlemann seems to hope. Christianity has been around for two thousand years and the symbol of the cross has not had much of a unifying force so far. Secondly, even within Christianity itself there is much room for disagreement over what best symbolizes its essence. Many would argue that it is not the cross, but rather the resurrection which best symbolizes the Christian transcendental values of faith, hope and charity. (The only problem is that it is difficult to buy a gold "resurrection" to put on a chain to hang around one's neck.)

By contrast let us consider the world-community building

potential symbolized by the advent of science in the scientific revolution. First of all the dichotomy drawn by Scharlemann between the "empirical" and "cultural" sciences is a false one. His criterion for the distinction seems to rest on the assumption that in the empirical (descriptive?) sciences "standpoint is something that one tries to eliminate" while in the cultural (normative?) sciences "the standpoint of the thinker 'belongs to the heart of the matter itself'"(p.15). If there is anything that contemporary science has taught us, it is that the recognition of the standpoint of the individual is absolutely essential to the complete understanding of our relationality to the world. Relativity and quantum physics have driven that point home as an unavoidable characteristic of reality.

What separates the empirical and cultural sciences is not the relativity of standpoints but the object of their focus. The empirical sciences attempt to describe the world in which we live and our relation to it. The cultural sciences attempt to establish norms which will give order and meaning to life. Unfortunately, the cultural (normative) disciplines have been much less successful in building a shared sense of community on a world scale. In fact, it might be said that they are the main forces preventing such a community. What the members share "between" one another internally separates them from the rest of humankind externally. This will not be overcome until human insecurity and jealousy is laid to rest. The recognition that all such positions are neither "right" nor "wrong" but "creative

standpoints" is a good step in that direction.

I should like to suggest that the model of the empirical sciences is an appropriate symbol for such world-community building. First, it is a mistake to think that these disciplines are not normative. In fact, it may be that their success is *due to the norms to which they adhere*. Second, they have already proven themselves more successful by far than any traditional religion in their ability to bring together a plurality of subjects from all races, creeds and nationalities (as evidenced partly by this very conference which we are presently attending) in a community of shared concern. Third, they represent one of the most (if not the most) successful forces in world history as judged by the criteria espoused by Scharlemann in his paper.

The first of these is the necessity of repeatability. This is one of the internal norms of the experimental method--an absolute requirement for the acceptance of a new hypothesis into the scientific community. But more than that, the breadth of acceptance of the scientific ideal has touched both European and Oriental cultures. It has created a "world scientific community" transcending boundaries of time and space--generations and nationalities.

The second criterion is that of destroying old norms and replacing them with new ones that transcend its predecessors. The advent of science in the West came about in the form of the scientific revolution. This was not just a revolution of

thought, but a cultural revolution of such magnitude that the traditional authority in matters of truth and reality (religion) was displaced by the new authority of science.

The most important criterion however, both for Scharlemann and for science, is that of transcendental openness-- of self-transcendence. This is the very essence of the scientific quest. The scientific method presupposes that no position can be taken as absolute. All are open to challenge and revision. All must constantly engage in self-critique. The very logic of the scientific method ensures that nothing can ever be proven to a certainty yet all is open to refutation. In the seventeenth century physicists assumed a vacuum, denied the possibility of instantaneous action at a distance and viewed the universe in terms of mechanistic materialism. Today physicists speculate that the universe is a plenum, conscious, and organically internally related through superluminal quantum connectedness. Galilean mechanics was transcended by the physics of Newton which in turn was transcended by relativity and quantum physics. Science is a quest and as such has built into it the transcendent quality of basic curiosity. It is not possible without an openness to self-critique, creative insight, and self-transcendence. It is quickly becoming, if it has not already become, the cultural religion of the modern world.

What better occasion than this to consider the possibility of examining the normative character of science as a creative standpoint upon which to build a world community?