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7. Charles Hartshorne

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7. Charles Hartshorne

Abstract

Theology differs from philosophical or scientific inquiry in general by being concerned about man in relationship to God. The existentialist says with distressing simplicity that "existence precedes essence" and hence he concerns himself with man in his concrete situation rather than with the abstract idea of man. We have also seen that Protestant theologians have for the most part abandoned the scholastic urge to circumscribe experience in a logical system. In fact, we see nowadays almost a systematic effort to avoid constructing self-contained schematizations. There is in contemporary Protestant theology a general protest against the rigidity seemingly required by the urge to have the package of truth completely wrapped and tied tightly for fast and easy distribution. Recently the cogency of theology is judged by its open-endedness, its unwillingness to engage in subtle question begging for the sake of a tenuous intellectual security. It can be maintained that this kind of doubt or hesitation has itself, to a large extent, created the problem of meaning. [excerpt]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Charles Hartshorne, Theology, Philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead

Disciplines

Philosophy | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section XXIII: Theological Meaning](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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Theology differs from philosophical or scientific inquiry in general by being concerned about man in relationship to God. The existentialist says with distressing simplicity that "existence precedes essence" and hence he concerns himself with man in his concrete situation rather than with the abstract idea of man. We have also seen that Protestant theologians have for the most part abandoned the scholastic urge to circumscribe experience in a logical system. In fact, we see nowadays almost a systematic effort to avoid constructing self-contained schematizations. There is in contemporary Protestant theology a general protest against the rigidity seemingly required by the urge to have the package of truth completely wrapped and tied tightly for fast and easy distribution. Recently the cogency of theology is judged by its open-endedness, its unwillingness to engage in subtle question begging for the sake of a tenuous intellectual security. It can be maintained that this kind of doubt or hesitation has itself, to a large extent, created the problem of meaning.

Still meaning may be sought and established either by a process of breaking down or of building up. The first might be called the analytical method; the second, the reconstructive. The analytical approach to the problem aims at a close scrutiny of the distinct facets of human life; the reconstructive approach works toward an integration of life as a whole. Charles Hartshorne (1897-) is an example of this second way. There is an acknowledged affinity between Hartshorne and Alfred North Whitehead. Hartshorne, for many years a professor at the University of Chicago and more recently at Emory University, has in fact taken the role of defender of the process philosophy among theologians.

This philosopher-theologian uses the "social idea" as his

* Ian T. Ramsey, Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases (London: SCM Press, 1957), pp. 14-18. Used with permission.

integrating principle. He argues that this social ideal accounts for everything but complete anarchy and complete determinism. Such a concept questions the advocacy of the idea of mechanism. He rejects Newton's world-picture because of its rigidity. In its place Hartshorne seeks to establish an organic picture within which the unity of the world can be affirmed. This philosophical effort seeks the "scientific certainty" and "empirical definiteness" that Enlightenment thought desires, but without its consequent determinism and restrictive limitations. He would have an inclusive idea not imposed upon the data but in effect created by the data. Hence this central and controlling social idea follows inquiry and does not precede it.

As Hartshorne sees it, even a stone can be described as a society. However, he defends himself against the fallacy of attributing life to inanimate things. For he does not assume that the material constituents of an object are alive in the same limited way that a man is alive by virtue of his subjective feeling of vitality. Rather, insofar as the molecules respond to their environment, adapt, and seek and avoid reactions, they are "alive."

Neither here nor at any other point in this thought does Hartshorne abandon reason in favor of revelation. Nor does he ever claim that subjective intuition provides understanding. He feels no necessity to derive religious truth from any non-empirical or irrational intrusion into the world. So we see in Hartshorne an attack upon the problem of meaning that is reconstructive. Each datum that the human mind can discover or infer is meaningful because of its continuity with all other data. Everything that the mind can experience is meaningful because it fits into a total concept of reality that can be known, however strenuous or subtle the effort to know may be.

In the first part of the following selection from Reality as Social Process (1953) the social idea is applied to matter. The second part develops a concept of God under the same general idea. And in the third part, Hartshorne explicates the continuity of reason and faith. The burden of this book is the establishment of meaning in the data of experience by their integration and comprehension within the framework of the social idea.

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