

Book Review

Logic and Transcendence, by Frithjof Schuon (Harper & Row, 1975)

Review by Whitall N. Perry

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 9, No. 4. (Autumn, 1975). © World Wisdom, Inc.

The author considers this his most representative book appearing in English to date; and without in any way derogating the major importance of his earlier publications, it can certainly be affirmed that this masterwork in its textual magnitude and multifaceted precision—logical, intellectual, and spiritual—offers a veritable panoply of what might be called the Schuonian cosmorama.

A clear statement of position is put forth in the “Introduction”, where Frithjof Schuon disabuses the reader of any tendency to assimilate his writings with the misconstructions which prevail when a work falls outside the category of modern science or philosophy, as regards everything from “occultism”, “syncretism”, and “gnosticism”, to “mysticism”, “intellectualism”, “traditionalism”, “esoterism”, and so forth. His point of departure is the *Sophia Perennis* (of which the practice can be named the *Religio Perennis*, or *Religio Coeli*), and he is an adherent of no “school” other than this.

The domain of *logic* in the book covers philosophy, rationalism, psychology, as well as the infra-rational; while the heading *transcendence* includes metaphysic, cosmological symbolism, and the spiritual contours of Revelation/Intellect with their repercussions throughout the traditional civilizations on sacred art, aesthetics, the science of the virtues, and above all the rapport between man and the Truth, in man’s central and thus predestined spiritual role as “regent” of the Universe. Midway between these two poles fall considerations on theology and spiritual dialectic. But reading this entire work is itself a discipline in seeing the transcendent logically, and of legitimizing logic in the light of transcendence—termed by the author “the intellectual penetration of contingencies”.

The book opens with a frontal attack on relativism and the manifold errors which its false and suicidal subjectivism has cumulatively spawned on the modern world, from evolutionism—under whose banner all is excused—to psychologism, a sort of caricature of Kantian criticism, where “analysis” as the end in itself engenders the final abdication of objective thought, unless the protagonists of psychologism with its attendant spirit of revolt alone enjoy some sort of immunity from the contradiction of an absolute relativity. In reality, the fact of error proves the existence of Truth, which is why “disequilibrium and the fragment have a debt to pay to Equilibrium and the Totality, and not the other way round... There is no science of the soul without a metaphysical basis to it and without spiritual remedies.” A particularly gross offshoot of the relativist mentality is the existentialist pose which abuses the terms “concrete” and “abstract” in such wise as to invert the normal rapport between accident and Substance (a theme developed in a later chapter, “The Argument Founded on Substance”). Thus, the accidental is taken for real, and the real for illusory : the term concrete—meaning “real”—is flatteringly applied to all that is mutable, mediocre, trivial, vulgar, ugly, and even vile; whereas the term abstract—meaning “unreal”—is pejoratively applied to all that is immutable, beautiful, noble, and spiritual. It has taken our century, says the author, to make a philosophy out of not thinking. Yet man is but a fragment of the primordial Substance, and he who refuses recognition of this fact inexorably petrifies into the accident which tries to become Substance in its own right, and thus damns itself.

The chapter “Rationalism, Real and Apparent” shows us the philosophical roots of these above-mentioned errors through a shattering analysis—in the true sense—of sensationalism and criticism that should be required reading in all university philosophy courses. Reason functions by the light of the Intellect, but Kantian critical philosophy in striving to reach an integral relativism—which is “a contradiction in itself and thus a pure absurdity”—becomes a play of mirrors that throws everything into subjective doubt and leads inevitably to existentialism. These philosophers in their “arrogant unconsciousness” would “kill with their petty vitriolic thoughts” the “great spokesmen of metaphysics”. It totally escapes their atrophied imagination that logic “is perfectly consistent only when exceeding itself”. Integral rationalism in its turn is a consequence of the tendency in Aristotelian metaphysics—unlike that of Plato and Plotinus—towards exteriorization; “the Aristotelian Pandora’s box is scientism coupled with sensationalism”. The mischief comes from the Church’s having lent an interested ear—a factor favoring the development of the Renaissance mentality. But that this could happen required the concurrence of other imponderables converging in what Schuon calls the “human margin”—a phenomenon explained by the presence of many *psychikos* (people who see things colored subjectively through their passions and emotions) in the world, but few *pneumatikos* (people who see the nature of things objectively in the light of Reality) : elements like henotheism, fideism, humilitarism, “spiritual’ nationalism”, and allied propensities of the human soul which are discussed in later chapters.

“Rationalism” is followed by “The Proofs of God”, a demonstration which affords to an unbiased and objective *rationality* ample grounds for logical belief, whether metaphysical, ontological, cosmological, teleological, experimental, or even evidential—where miracles are concerned. But man contains within himself the greatest proof of all, namely, that inborn faculty capable of conceiving the Immutable, and which thus allows him to transcend his own “cosmic accident”, or individuality.

Now comes the more “theological” section of the book, including an exhaustive elucidation in “Evidence and Mystery” of the enigmas engendered by Trinitarianism, and how their resolution can only be achieved through recourse to the doctrine of *Mâyâ*—a concept lacking, explicitly at least, in Monotheism. We are also taken in Oriental Dialectic through the incredible extravagances of “illogicism” that piety and fervor can reach in their unilateral concern over articles of faith. The thing to retain here is that the Aryan temperament favors intellection, of which rationalism—the “Greek miracle”—is the caricature; whereas the Semitic temperament thrives on inspiration, which when uncontrolled becomes irrationality. It has been the genius of India to offer what Schuon calls “the Hindu or Vedantic miracle”, namely, that “perfect equilibrium between the sense of proportion and the sense of the sacred”.

It is refreshing after all this to enter into the more purely doctrinal and spiritual half of the book, which begins with a beautifully crafted chapter on “The Demiurge in North American Mythology”, giving the reader a dissertation concerning *Mâyâ* and satisfying what by now may be for him an acute need of causality on how to situate the phenomenon of absurdity in the world. This is followed by two similarly instructive essays, “The Alchemy of the Sentiments” and “The Symbolism of the Hourglass”. The next three chapters—“The Problem of Qualifications”, “Concerning the Love of God”, and “Understanding and Believing”—can serve the mindful reader as an “examination of conscience”, where we see the relationships between Truth and virtue, morality and the Universal Law. Rarest of all is the perfect complementarism of the intellectual qualification with the moral. This means that piety will be to belief what faith is to understanding (Intellect), or again, what sanctity is to Truth. Hence, the soul will have the same rapport with the spirit that beauty has with Truth. The fiery intelligence must be counterbalanced by the calm serenity of faith, the key to which is the sense of the sacred. From the ideal combination of these qualities—the union of the pole Being or Existence (*Sat* in Hindu terms) with the pole Consciousness or Knowledge (*Chit*)—results Beatitude or Life (*Ananda*). As all these considerations concern the modalities of the soul’s relationship with God, the author includes an exposition called “The Servant and Union” which penetrates the mysteries of identity and otherness: the polarity between the servant and the Lord is by its very nature inviolable; the Essence, however, subsists outside of the axis Creator-creature, Principle-manifestation; and through the requisite and subtle interplay of intellection with Grace, the duality can be resolved.

“Nature and Function of the Spiritual Master” serves as the “signature” to this whole work. “The Saint and the Divine Image” explains the principles of iconography, while “Truths and Errors Concerning Beauty” extends these considerations to the fundamentals governing the

science of aesthetics, and to the definition and meaning of beauty in relation to forms of art and especially its role in the spiritual life. The subject of the next chapter might appear unrelated in the context of the book, dealing as it does with certain aspects of Buddhist mythology and sacred history; but in reality “Dharmakara’s Vow” uses Amidism as a revealing point of departure for essential teachings on initiatic pacts, the way of invocation, and the divine correlation present between the principal and relative planes of existence.

In a crystalline summary called “Man and Certainty”, Schuon presents us with “a geometry that is at once simple and primordial” of man’s place in the Universe. Man by definition means “intelligence capable of the Absolute and of objectification or of relativization; an animal has neither the sense of the Absolute nor, consequently, of contingency.” With man, will is free because, precisely, his intelligence is total. The function of the Intellect is to discern between the Real and the illusory, the function of the will to concentrate on the Real: Truth and Union. Life is a series of choices and constraints in a world composed of incertitudes. Over and above all this, however, fundamental certitudes exist; the author shows us what they are, and how they can be made the means of achieving ultimate felicity.

This book in its multidimensional perspectives offers an invaluable training to the attentive reader in intellectual discernment and spiritual “plasticity”. And for those who will listen, it spells a devastating finale to all of Europeandom’s intellectual arrogance, pretension, and sheer bad faith manifesting in the philosophical, psychological, and relativistic aberrations accumulated particularly since the Renaissance—a word moreover that would do better within quotation marks. Schuon refutes and rectifies right and left with thunderbolts of logic. Yet this is performed with such serenity and “spiritual equipoise” that the total effect is one of catharsis and regeneration. It is as though the tocsin had sounded on the modern world: “My play here is finished,” as the *Srimad Bhagavatam* says. We see that traditional values alone can answer the problems overwhelming civilization today.

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Peter N. Townsend, the translator, merits citation for his extremely skilful English rendering from the original French, which being a synthesis of Latin logic conveyed through luxuriance of expertly honed idioms does not readily lend itself to our tongue.