

THAT FOREIGN BOY

Autobiographical Notes

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I stared up at the dark arched night sky with its numberless twinkling stars wondering whether there was any meaning to the universe, to life, or to my life. On each side of our farm driveway at Cooksville, Ontario, the rows of cedar trees formed a path which in the dim night light seemed to lead on and on – but to where?

It was the Spring of 1946. World War II had ended the previous summer. Some of my friends lay in Allied military cemeteries in France, England and India. I had been medically rejected as a volunteer for Canada's military services due to a childhood leg injury. Spared for what? During the war I worked as a layout draftsman on small arms design and production. It was worthy work, but what next?

While in grade eleven at a Toronto Tech-Commerce High School I had to withdraw from school because of my father's illness in order to help keep our shoe repair shop going as well as our small market gardening farm at Cooksville.

Involvement in church life had inspired me to aspire. To what? My High School education was incomplete. I had no business experience and little industrial experience. That pretty well summed up the situation.

I sensed an urge to learn and a calling to minister and serve. How could that become a reality when family, church, friends, and associates at work gave no encouragement? What did a foreign young man without resources who came from a poverty-stricken family which was just then extricating itself from the Great Depression and the war need with an education?

The magnetic pull toward a goal, even if ill-defined and appearing foolish to those closest to me, moved me against the odds. Bible School studies were merely a taste of what could be. A friend and mentor took me to the Registrar of the nearby university in London, Ontario. She simply said: "Occasionally we accept an adult student who has not completed High School. If you pass an aptitude test we will admit you for one semester on a trial basis."

That was all I needed. There followed completion of the B.A., which included the biblical languages. Then the M.A. in Philosophy, with special emphasis on the classical and modern philosophers. On to the Honors B.D. for the University of London. Finally, the doctorate at Oxford.

While a sense of purpose drew me on, how can one preserve it while immersed in an ethos which denies it? The cultural mood of my early university education rejected, even satirized, the concept of ideals which should inspire purposeful life and work.

One of my favorite philosophy professors was an ardent advocate of Naturalism in its classical Epicurean and contemporary American hedonist form. He argued that the behavior of all organisms is conditioned solely by the biological and psychological urge to gratify the senses – the need-satisfaction cycle. This modern version of the ancient pleasure principle claims that what organisms in fact do is the true meaning of what they ought to do if those actions meet need or gratify the senses.

My professor insisted that altruism is intellectually and emotionally suicidal. The pursuit of any object of any interest defines the good. On this premise only self-gratification is the true motive for action. It remained a puzzle for me: if psychological hedonism is the root of action why should intelligence lead any one of us to care about anyone else except to conserve that person or that something for the sake of one's own gratification? Add to this ancient Epicurean and modern atomism and one arrives full circle at the concept that all of reality has come about by the chance concatenation of atoms and that to attribute mind or purpose or freedom of action to such a structure or within such a structure is sheer nonsense.

This was the question put to me: should I make pleasure the intrinsic motive of actions? Projecting such a thesis as the foundation of life was troubling. There was the unresolved ambivalence between egoism and altruism. Hedonists tended to minimize reason as the foundation of their premise but then went on to minimize motor-affective responses with regard to future actions when they advocated “highly refined,” “permanent as against transient pleasures,” and sought to distinguish between “negative” and “positive” motor-affective responses. As well, claims by behaviorists to being scientific mystified me. So much was said about behavioral responses when, as Thomas Nagel the physicist argued, many of the most important things of life are not empirically discernible or manageable – not the least of which is an adequate accounting of freedom and the will.

Is my willing to do something simply the last act in a behaviorally conditioned series? If so, when applied to human experience how can one account for the socially detaching power of religion in the lives of many martyrs? One may assign new uses to terms such as freedom, the good, that which is right as against that which is wrong, but this does not and cannot pre-empt the realities the words stand for. I sensed that I needed something more than to define good as that which promotes a course of action and right as that which is inherently connected with that which is needed. Reality, I felt, entails something more intrinsic than mere behavior.

I was surprised to discover that these were questions St. Paul was dealing with and that the parallels between the popular hedonism of his day is virtually identical with our modern “pursuit of the good life” ethos. For Paul, the divinely motivating purpose principle trumped the naturalistic behavior principle.

Few students of St. Paul's writings grasp the distinctions he makes between a purposeful universe and one driven by the chance movements of atoms, or the intensity with which he draws that contrast. In a satirical thrust he speaks of two ways in which “things that are not” (the *to mē on* of ancient Greek metaphysics) are conceived: the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus as allegedly the only real things with the things that are not, i.e., despised spiritual realities. Paul says that atomism becomes a form of self-deception if it is thought capable of explaining all of

reality. People, Paul says, become “slaves to the elements of the universe,” where *elements* does not mean letters of the alphabet as some think, but the atoms of a mechanistically conceived universe.

Paul agreed with the “pursuit of the good life” advocates of his day that our present life is an interim but not, as they said, between a past black eternity and a future black eternity. There is more to the universe than matter and motion. While they construct theories about atoms which they cannot see and which theories they claim are not myths, the truth of the way things are beckons: the universe is not purposeless and its essential reality is spiritual in nature. The key to living is not avoidance of envy, ambition and competition on the one side, and the pursuit of pleasure on the other (all based on the principle of expedience); not a universe empty of over-arching morality, or commitment, with only the scanning of advantage and disadvantage of any action or in any relationship.

What were the golden texts of the good life for those who pursued it so ardently, and should these become the tablets posted on the entrance foyer of my soul? Paul’s scalpel is sharp and discerning: First, fascination with food – “their God is their belly.” Metrodorus had urged that “the pleasure of the stomach is the beginning and root of all good.” Second, obsession with sex – “they glory in their shame.” Lanctanius said that all the dogs of philosophy were barking around Epicurus. Paul’s warning “beware of the dogs” meant that humans should not flaunt sexuality publicly as dogs do. Third, “their mind is on earthly things,” which means more than worldliness. Rather, it means “a this-life-only” attitude; a totally materialistic, purposeless view of reality. Hence Paul repeatedly contrasts flesh and spirit, by which he does not denigrate earthly existence nor the human body, but a mind-set that views existence purely as a set of motor-affective responses.

The popular Epicurean lists of expedient virtues were widely published and circulated in the ancient world. Against these Paul posted contrasting lists. One of these includes: whatever makes for truthfulness, whatever makes for reverence (including respect for others), whatever encourages civic duty, whatever makes for chastity, whatever makes for friendliness, whatever makes for charity. Virtue not expedience must be at the core of human existence.

In light of these philosophical challenges and mental perambulations, why Oxford? That aspect of the modern British theological heritage which focused on the Cross of Christ drew me. I wanted to grasp more fully the meaning of Christ’s death on the Cross not only with regard to theology but also as application to the self-giving love we as God’s creatures and servants are called upon to share with others.

Wherein lies the satisfaction? There is much to be grateful for, especially the thousands of students who, taught and led by me and others during their formal studies, are spread across the face of the earth in service for the good of humanity, some in church ministries, many encouraging good agricultural practices, others in education and medicine, business formation, manufacturing, trade and commerce, and diplomatic service.

This impelling force has worked in me and in them more as inner suasion than as external drive. It is, as A. N. Whitehead said, “the eternal urge of desire” for realization of the potentialities that inhere in life and which life’s opportunities offer to us as spiritual beings.

This is never a matter of “whatever turns you on,” or “makes you feel good.” Rather, it is the decisiveness of an ideal which by the power of its attraction draws to God-given, life-fulfilling purpose, not for self-gratification, but to grasp the truth of the way things are in order to contribute to what humanity may become.