

SCRIPTURALISM AND
WORLDLY PHILOSOPHIES



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From the very beginning of the Christian age, believers have faced the need to defend the faith against false religions, heresies, and atheism. They have striven to persuade people of other faiths or religions, or of no faith or religion, to believe in God, and to believe what God has revealed in the Holy Scriptures. Today there is no less a need to defend the faith and to present to the world a credible, comprehensive, Christian worldview. Gordon H. Clark, a twentieth-century evangelical, philosopher, has attempted to advance such a system.¹ Dr Clark's philosophical and theological system, one in which Scripture is absolutely foundational, may be fittingly called *Scripturalism*.² It has also been called *Presuppositionalism*, *Dogmatism*, *Christian Rationalism* (not to be confused with Classical rationalism), and *Christian Intellectualism*.³ This thesis paper seeks to point out the advantages of the Gordon Clark's system of Scripturalism over various worldly philosophies. It will focus particularly on the fields of Epistemology and Ethics.

We will begin our examination of worldly (often referred to as secular philosophy) by considering the problem of knowledge. Before we can discuss the strengths and weakness of various philosophical positions, or begin to examine areas of philosophy such as ontology, or ethics, we must begin with *epistemology*. That is, we must have a theory of knowledge. Knowledge has a claim to be the most important subject in philosophy.⁴ The questions of what we can know, how we can know, what we know, and what is the nature of knowledge are central to philosophy as a whole.⁵

¹ W.A. Elwell, "Clark, Gordon Haddon," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter J. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 2001) 270.

² W. Gary Crampton, *The Scripturalism of Gordon H. Clark* (Trinity Foundation, 1999) 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stephen Law, *Philosophy: Eyewitness Companion* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2007) 49.

⁵ Law, 49.

In the historical development of secular philosophy there have been three major methods of epistemology.⁶ The first of these, called *rationalism*, holds that ideas of reason are innate to the mind; they are the sole source of knowledge.⁷ Thus, pure rationalism excludes both sensory experience and divine revelation as means of knowledge.

In contrast to rationalism, the second method of knowledge, known as *empiricism*, asserts that sensory experience is the primary source of human knowledge.⁸ Pure empiricism then asserts that the mind begins as a *tabula rasa* or blank tablet. Understandably, the rationalist/empiricist debate has dominated the question of the nature and source of knowledge.⁹

The third method of knowledge, though not truly a “method” of knowledge as such, but rather an epistemological position, may be called *irrationalism*, which nothing else than empiricism carried out to its logical conclusion, resulting in a kind of scepticism.¹⁰ This position holds that little if any knowledge can be acquired either by the reason of rationalism, or by the sensory experience (perception) of empiricism. In general, irrationalism either doubts that the world has a rational structure, meaning, or purpose, or else it doubts whether the universe is knowable without distortion.¹¹ For this reason, it can advance no coherent method of knowing. The epistemology of each of these three positions will now be discussed in more depth.

A rationalist who has had an enormous influence on Western philosophy is Plato (ca. 427-347 BC). He is also the first philosopher to produce a substantial body of work that has survived. Plato held that beliefs must be both true and supported by strong evidence in order to qualify as *knowledge*.¹² Like Heraclitus before him, Plato held that all things in the world perceived by the

⁶ Crampton, 17.

⁷ P. D. Feinberg, “Epistemology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed., ed. Walter J. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House Company, 2001) 382.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Crampton, 24.

¹¹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Irrationalism,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 1998, accessed January 12, 2019, www.britannica.com/topic/irrationalism.

¹² Law, 49.

senses are forever becoming something else (existing in a state of flux, known as the *Heraclitean Flux*). Thus, the world appearing to the senses is too unstable to be an object of true knowledge; once something is known, it becomes something else.¹³ The true objects of knowledge, Plato reasoned, existed not in the deceptive world of sensations, but in the “real world” of “supra-sensible, unchanging Ideas.”¹⁴ This view is also referred to as a priori knowledge, that is, knowledge prior to experience. Plato believed that a philosopher can become aware of the “forms” that underlie the shifting world of the senses through reminiscences of a previous existence by means of sensory stimulation. Hence, learning is not discovering anything new, but the recollection of what we once knew.¹⁵

Although Plato’s theory of pre-existence might explain how mathematical or geometrical ideas of which we can have no experience can be accounted for, such as the concept of a perfect cube, Gordon Clark points out that when entering the area of politics or ethics, the plausibility of reminiscence soon vanishes.¹⁶ In addition, it may be asked, since sensation stimulates different notions in different people, how is it possible to know the result is the recovery of true knowledge or merely a baseless notion?

A philosopher arriving much later on the scene was Rene Descartes (1596–1650). As a rationalist, anxious not to be deceived by sensation and experience, Descartes searched for an undoubtable truth, which he found in the *cogito*.¹⁷ Yet by his occasional “smuggling in” of his own presuppositions, it appears that Descartes didn’t find the rationalist method of relying on reason or logic alone entirely satisfactory.¹⁸

Moving on from Descartes’ inconsistency, Georg Hegel (1770–1831) made one mighty, final attempt to establish rationalism with a scheme that promised to

¹³ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁴ Gordon H. Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (Trinity Foundation, 1993) 29.

¹⁵ *Law*, 247.

¹⁶ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 29.

¹⁷ Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, 1985) 310.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 309–310.

explain everything without exception by means of a system of categories.¹⁹ Yet, it soon became apparent that particular things could not be rationally deduced from his categories, and this included Herr Krug's pen.²⁰

Leaving rationalism, we must now consider *empiricism*. Not agreeing with his teacher Plato, Aristotle (384–323 BC), the father of empiricism, proposed to base all knowledge on sensory experience.²¹ In order to do this, Aristotle would have to show how definitions, such as “justice” and “equality,” are derived from sensory experience, and also determine a system of *categories*—the most basic concepts, without which thinking is impossible—all without assuming any *a priori* knowledge as proposed in rationalism, and building all knowledge on that which is deduced *a posteriori* from observation.

However, even with Aristotle's most important *category*, “substance,” we immediately find a difficulty.²² Aristotle maintained that there are *primary realities* (individual sense objects) and *secondary realities* (classes or concepts). Seeing the category of substance can be either of these, it is a *double category*.²³ Clark argues that if a particular mountain, for instance, Mount Blanca, is a primary reality, then a single rock from that mountain could not be an individual, and therefore could not be real.²⁴ Furthermore, adds Clark, if we consider Mount Blanca as part of the Rocky Mountain chain, which is the *individual sense object*: the rock, the mountain, or the mountain chain?

To point out a further problem, Aristotle states that the most distinctive mark of a *substance* is that it remains numerically one despite admitting contrary qualities. But someone might ask that if one and the same man can be warm or cold, can he also be living and dead and remain the same *substance*?²⁵ Clark writes, “It seems that Aristotle sometimes determines numerical unity by a prior knowledge of what a *substance* is, and at other times identifies *substance*

¹⁹ Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1961) 63.

²⁰ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 466.

²¹ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 30.

²² Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 108.

²³ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 31.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 109.

by its numerical unity.”²⁶ Other problems have been pointed out with regards to the categories of *quality* and *relation* which further demolish Aristotelian epistemology.²⁷

Much later came the noted philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), who was probably the greatest philosopher to have written in the English language and a key figure in the Enlightenment.²⁸ A strict empiricist also, Hume reasoned that all perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves either into the lively and vivid *impressions*, or the fainter images of *ideas*.²⁹ Hume shared with philosopher George Berkeley (1685–1753) the view that external bodies do not exist, though if they did, we could know nothing about them.³⁰ Because sensory experiences take place only in the mind, we cannot ascertain that they resemble anything external to it. Thus Hume’s efforts end in epistemological scepticism.

Trying to salvage a role for sensation, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) worked to build a bridge between rationalism and empiricism. Experience could produce knowledge, he reasoned, if *a priori* categories of thought could be used to organise the materials of sense.³¹ Despite his best efforts the problem remained: one could only know *things-as-they-appear-to-us*, but not the *things-in-themselves*. Thus neither rationalism nor empiricism succeeded in making knowledge possible.

The failure of both rationalism and empiricism to provide a viable epistemology paved the way for an epoch of *irrationalism*. One way this manifested itself was the rejection of reason. Strongly anti-Hegelian, Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) attacked reason and rationality in his writings, repudiating the laws of logic.³² Later, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) expressed doubt that the law of contradiction was adequate for

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 32.

²⁸ Law, 290.

²⁹ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 382.

³⁰ Gordon H. Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy* (Jefferson, Maryland: The Trinity Foundation, 1973) 76.

³¹ Law, 295–296.

³² Clark, *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, 106.

reality, supposing that we can never know if the world of things corresponds to our laws of thoughts.³³ For the American behaviourist John Dewey (1859–1952) the principles of logic were not fixed, having evolved from bodily habits. Sometime in the future, he speculated, the law of contradiction will no longer hold, and perhaps it no longer holds at present.³⁴

Of course, it goes without saying that denial of the law of contradiction presents a serious problem. Such a position is self-refuting, since we cannot attack or defend that position without making use of that law. Thus, without logic not only is philosophical debate impossible, but even conversation becomes nothing more than “the chatter of monkeys.”³⁵ Irrationalist epistemology, we correctly understand, leads only to chaos, and, as Clark said, “Chaos is not a philosophy.”³⁶

Over against these failed attempts at a theory of knowledge, the epistemology of *Scripturalism* may be compared. Rather than beginning by attempting to prove the existence of god, and then proving that this god is the God revealed in the Bible, Dr Gordon Clark begins with the axiom: *The Bible alone is the Word of God*.³⁷ Though, to many people, this might appear to be too huge an assumption to make without incontestable proof, it is not so strange when you consider the role of axioms in philosophy. Axioms, by their nature, are not deducible from more fundamental knowledge. If we could prove the proposition that the Bible is the Word of God from a more basic truth, then that truth would be our starting point. But, as it is, nothing comes before our proposition, and that is why it is an axiom.³⁸ Rather than axioms being proven by being deducible from more basic truths, axioms are tested by how well they allow the philosopher to succeed in solving his problem.³⁹ If they, for instance, make knowledge possible, the philosopher rewards them with his approval. If we accept the axiom that the Bible is the word of God, then the numerous

³³ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Crampton, 26–27.

³⁸ Crampton, 28.

³⁹ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 63.

propositions of Scripture are available to us as knowledge—knowledge is made possible! As Spinoza required 15 definitions and axioms in just his first book, it would seem reasonable to allow Dr. Clark one.⁴⁰

Though it might not please pietists and others who imagine a dichotomy between revelation and reason, Clark asserts the necessity of reason (logic) in his Christian philosophical system. The law of contradiction is foundational or functional in man as the image of God, because it is required to understand the Scriptures themselves.⁴¹ However, since the Scriptures presuppose logic, should we then not choose the law of contradiction as our first principle, rather than Scripture?⁴² In answer to this question, Clark points out that God and logic are one and the same first principle revealed in the Scripture.⁴³ No priority can be assigned to logic and God either temporally, logically, or analytically.⁴⁴ Thus, they are not chronological but are logically necessary and are therefore identified as essentially the same. The prologue to John's gospel may be legitimately paraphrased, "In the beginning was *Logic*, and *Logic* was with God, and *Logic* was God."⁴⁵ Thus, the law of contradiction should not be imagined to be something prior to, or independent of God, because it is identified with God's way of thinking, that is, in His revelation of Himself in Scripture, and in Christ, who is Himself the Word of God, and Logic of God, and the Wisdom of God.⁴⁶ Genesis 1:27 states that man was made in the image of God, and from the New Testament we learn that man as the image of God is a rational (logical) being, consisting of knowledge, righteousness and holiness. (Col.3:10; Eph.4:24). The Westminster Divines wrote in their Confession of Faith in chapter 4 and section 2: "*After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts.*" The good news for humanity, therefore, is that man as a rational creature, is able to share in some of the same knowledge

⁴⁰ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 94.

⁴¹ Crampton, 29.

⁴² Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 68.

⁴³ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 73.

⁴⁴ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 72.

⁴⁵ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 71.

⁴⁶ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 72.

that God possesses, though it is not denied that there is a quantitative difference.⁴⁷

Secular philosophers, such as Plato and Kant reasoned man's possession of *a priori* equipment. Similarly, the Scripturalism of Dr Clark holds that as the image of God, man can think logically because God has given him this innate ability. Furthermore, the propositions of Scripture are objects of knowledge which are understandable to us. This is something empiricism could never achieve, since through our senses we can never know the object itself, but only sensory perceptions which may or may not bear some resemblance to the object.

Moving on from the discussion of epistemology, consideration will now be given to a branch of philosophy to some degree shaped by epistemology, the subject of *ethics*. Though pre-Socratic thinkers gave little systematic thought to this subject, with the arrival of Socrates and Plato, the question of what is good and moral conduct became a subject of philosophic study.⁴⁸ Plato believed that personal conduct should be controlled by knowledge and not by a democratic assembly or dictator.⁴⁹ That ethics should be derived from a higher source than civil government is a common belief today. However, what might find disagreement today is that Plato's morality was not framed with reference to a sovereign, moral Law-giver. Plato appears to believe that pious acts are liked by the gods because the acts are pious in themselves, rather than being considered pious because the gods liked them.⁵⁰ This implies that there are principles above and beyond the divine that determine morality. As noted by Dr Clark, Plato never freed himself from the assumption that the personal Maker of the world is subordinate to moral laws existing independently of himself.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Crampton, 48.

⁴⁸ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 51.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 57.

⁵¹ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 58.

But, one might ask, where we might find these moral laws? Empiricism, having failed, as shown by David Hume, to provide any knowledge, can hardly hope to find moral knowledge. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), however, was fascinated by the idea of the moral law within human beings.⁵² Recognising that the moral law cannot be based on experience, and hoping to ground morality in reason, Kant saw the marks of the *a priori* in the law’s necessity, objectivity, and universality.⁵³ Both rationality and morality, argued Kant, are universal and do not change depending on what we want.⁵⁴ We make choices on the basis of our *maxims*—the principles that express our reasons for doing things. A morally permissible maxim is one that we would wish for everyone to act upon. For instance, the maxim “Tell a lie if it is to your advantage,” can only be morally acceptable if we could will everyone to do the same. Since we wish that everyone else would be honest and tell the truth, telling a lie for this reason is wrong. In other words, such a maxim would be against what Kant called *the categorical imperative*.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, a number of objections may be made against Kant’s categorical imperative. Philosophers have protested that as long as we phrase our maxims carefully we can justify any action. In addition, Hegel and his followers put forward a number of cases in which Kant’s test of universalisation provide either no meaningful answer, or gave an obviously wrong answer.⁵⁶ For example, consider the maxim, “Help the poor.” If everyone helped the poor, there would be no poor left to help, bringing an end to beneficence. Thus, helping the poor is immoral according to Kant’s model.⁵⁷

Another problem with Kant’s ethical theory concerns the relation of mechanical law and the possibility of ethical conduct.⁵⁸ Though ethical conduct requires freedom, this seems to be excluded by the mechanism of the

⁵² Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 421.

⁵³ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 422.

⁵⁴ Law, 105.

⁵⁵ Law, 106.

⁵⁶ “Kantian Ethics” *Wikipedia*, last modified December 16, 2018, accessed January 22, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kantian_ethics.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 424.

visible world. Though Kant attempts to solve this dilemma by positing for human beings a type of causality other than mechanical causality, he can produce no evidence that such causality exists.⁵⁹ In the words of Dr Clark, “the tension between the mechanism of the visible world and the moral freedom of the noumenal world tears the theory in two”.⁶⁰

Following Kant, the moral philosophy of utilitarianism arose. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), described as the father of the movement, believed that “Nature has [given us] two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain.”⁶¹ Accordingly, Bentham asserted that the search for the former and the avoidance of the latter are the sole motivating forces for humanity.⁶² An action is morally right, he proposed, if it results in the greatest happiness and the minimum of pain for the greatest number of people. Hence, our deeds are not judged in themselves, but in terms of their consequences. For example, a lie is permissible and morally good if it maximises happiness.⁶³ Later, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), also a utilitarian, argued that human happiness is more complex than Bentham at first imagined.⁶⁴ Certain pleasures and pains are more important than others: some pleasures are basic and others more aesthetic.

Of course, as one would expect, utilitarianism is seriously flawed. First, it doesn’t rule out any kind of action. If, for instance, a group of people torturing a child produces more happiness than pain, it is morally right.⁶⁵ Second, and this is a huge problem, the calculation of the net happiness or pleasure of an action is impossible. No one is able to quantify with any accuracy the pleasure and pain of two lines of action.⁶⁶ This would require omniscience. As Mill himself pointed out, human happiness is a complex subject. Third, utilitarianism gives no respect to the concept of justice.⁶⁷ Fourth, since

⁵⁹ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 425.

⁶⁰ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 45.

⁶¹ Law, 300.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Law, 102.

⁶⁴ Law, 309.

⁶⁵ Law, 103.

⁶⁶ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 45.

⁶⁷ Law, 103.

utilitarianism doesn't consider our own happiness as any more important than anyone else's, we cannot justify augmenting our own happiness, until the whole world is made equally as happy as we are.⁶⁸

The last thinker's work to be considered briefly here is that of the American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, John Dewey. Dewey, as an irrationalist, viewed epistemology as a "pseudo-problem and a waste of time."⁶⁹ Dewey's interests lay in science, which to him was the most successful method of knowing. Accordingly, Dewey believed ethics should be made continuous with science.⁷⁰ The experimental methodology of physics could and should be applied to the wider field of human life. No beliefs are inherently true and must be obeyed at all costs. Rather, moral laws are like the laws of physics and may be abandoned when found no longer useful. Moral laws should be tested by seeing what happens when they are acted upon.⁷¹

In criticism of Dewey's ethics, obviously the flexibility of moral laws in practice may not be very different to the denial of moral law altogether, and is typical of the subjectivism of his irrationalist position. In addition, he assumes that moral law may be tested in specific situations as to their result. However, not all choices can be tested. For example, we cannot test whether it is better to commit suicide at the age of 25 or not.

In these examples of various secular ethical positions, we observe that all of them face difficulties and fail to a greater or larger extent to establish defensible and reliable moral standards. Clark comments, "The secular theories failed because there is no valid argument by which one can start from observable phenomena and reach a conclusion concerning obligation."⁷²

Scripturalism, on the other hand, recognises that divine revelation provides an unchanging standard of ethics by means of the Ten Commandments. In

⁶⁸ Law, 103.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 518.

⁷⁰ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 528.

⁷¹ Clark, *Thales to Dewey*, 531.

⁷² Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 124.

addition, we are furnished with abundant moral instruction throughout the rest of the Bible, particularly in Proverbs, the Sermon on the Mount, and the New Testament epistles. However, unlike the ancient Greeks who imagined that the idea of goodness and justice were above the gods, Scripturalism asserts that these concepts are subordinate to God, and that he alone is the source and determiner of all truth.⁷³ In other words, what God approves and deems good is good simply because God has thought it so. Though there are no doubt many things the Lord has not revealed, one thing he certainly has revealed is his law (Deut.29:29).

In conclusion to this discussion, we have seen that secular philosophy has failed to make knowledge possible either by means of reason or through experience. In addition, secular philosophy has not provided an ethical system that is universal, reliable, or able to give guidance in the decisions of everyday life. However, if the axiom of revelation is allowed, that the Bible is the word of God, the many propositions of Scripture are seen as objects of knowledge—knowledge is possible! And this knowledge includes ethical knowledge in the form of God’s Law—the objective, unchanging moral code that he has given us.

⁷³ Clark, *An Introduction to Christian Philosophy*, 69.

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