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The Philosophy of Julius Seelye Bixler

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IN HONOR

OF

DR. J. SEELYE BIXLER

President of Colby College, 1942-1960

When I first made the acquaintance of Dr. J. Seelye Bixler, he was a professor at Harvard and I was a member of the Harvard daily chapel choir. When Dr. Bixler spoke in chapel the members of the choir—a group of crass mercenaries who were paid to sing, rather than idealists who came to pray—actually listened to the sermon. He thus impressed me early, and he has impressed me ever since.

One of the rewards of coming to Colby in 1957 was the privilege of working in close association with Dr. Bixler, learning the mysteries of college administration from one of the great personalities among college presidents in our day. These pages will suggest some of the measure of the wisdom which governed his official actions, as well as some of the warmth of his personality which set the tone for Colby College for eighteen years.

ROBERT E. L. STRIDER
President, Colby College
In studying Bixler's philosophy one does well to keep in mind that he is as much a theologian as a philosopher. This combination of philosopher-theologian is a special asset in these present days when the usual combination is that of philosopher-scientist. It makes it possible for Bixler to see quite clearly where frequently philosophers have gone overboard in their eagerness to develop and conform to the concepts of science, which essentially means the concepts of physics and mathematics.

Bixler conceives that a central aim of philosophy is that of attaining an overall view of the world—a view that will include in its survey not only things intellectual but also things practical and emotional, values as well as facts, religion as well as science. There are truths from religion as well as from science. A philosophy which restricts its concern to the results of the sciences is inadequate to human experience.

His general attitude in these respects is clearly summarized near the beginning of a scholarly article where he is at particular pains to give his thoughts precise statement. The title of the article, "The Problem of Religious Knowledge," of itself prefigures his considered philosophical judgment. He maintains that there is religious knowledge. To many it may seem strange that there should be any issue about this. Yet this has been questioned by both theological and philosophical schools.

Here is the condensed statement of Bixler's position: "(1) That the term 'knowledge' should not be restricted by a positivistic empiricism to judgments confirmed by sense data alone, but should be expanded to include (a) systematic knowledge of the metaphysical type, (b) knowledge of ideals which are possibilities of experience and determinative of actual reflective experience, and (c) an interpretation of the world as a whole on the basis of such knowledge of ideals."
“(2) That although religion lacks the preciseness of science and uses methods which often do not allow for exact scientific confirmation, its closest analogy, nevertheless, is with the knowledge situation, since, like knowledge, it presupposes participation in relationships that are as reasonable as they are universal and necessary.

“(3) That ‘faith’ stands for practical loyalty to ideals and to the power which is working to realize them. Insofar as faith so understood implies beliefs, these are expressions of convictions to the appropriateness of voluntary commitment rather than statements of opinion about matters of empirical fact. Such beliefs cannot receive verification in the scientific sense, but they may appeal to a type of practical verification leading to an assurance which cannot be called arbitrary.

“Let us define experience as ‘what happens when a self meets a world,’ knowledge as ‘well grounded beliefs expressed in critical judgments,’ value as ‘what is reasonably considered to be an authoritative norm for conduct appreciation or reflection,’ religion as ‘devotion to ideal values and to the power which is at work to make them actual.’” (Philosophical Review, November 1942).

The whole of Bixler’s philosophy, I believe, lies as in a kernel within these statements. His numerous articles and books are expansions of one or another of the theses laid down here. It is an extraordinarily condensed epitome of a comprehensive philosophical position.

Let us look first at what is denied. Bixler in this and other writings spends a good deal of space in the expansion of these denials. He picks out two extreme schools of contemporary belief for attack as examples of what he regards as destructive of his broad and tolerant philosophical attitude. These are the logical-positivist school in philosophy, and the existentialist Barthian school in theology. Both are dogmatic in different ways. And both have an ancient ancestry. So, these criticisms are not of transitory movements, but of deeply imbedded trends of human bias. The one is the bias for a narrow, supposedly irrefutable intellectualism, the other a bias for an intransigent anti-intellectualism.
The logical-positivist position representing today the first of these biases is briefly this: the model for successful achievement in knowledge is that of science, and the apex of such knowledge is to be found in mathematics and physics. Mathematics gives logical truth which consists in rigorous deduction of theorems from postulates and definitions according to rules which guarantee non-contradiction. A mathematical system gives no information about facts, however, though it is essential for scientific deductions. Factual knowledge, or empirical truth, comes entirely from empirical science. In science, hypotheses are framed and by observation and experiment confirmed through sense experience. The ultimate verification of a scientific statement is through sensation, usually visual. The empirical truth of a complicated hypothesis involving many steps of mathematical deduction and controlled experiment gets verified by the visual observation of a number of pointer readings on a scale. And in rougher ways the same with all factual statements capable of verification. The logical-positivist generalizes this situation and concludes that there is no fully justifiable empirical statement that does not find its ultimate verification in sense data. All knowledge of matters of fact—and that means all knowledge except the mathematical which offers no factual information—is, for the logical positivist, based on sensation. Any statements that cannot be traced back ultimately to sensations are, accordingly "meaningless." By this sweeping generalization, it turns out that all statements about values are "meaningless," all metaphysical statements, and all theological statements.

Bixler, in the summary above, challenges the logical-positivist position. He is saying that there is religious knowledge as well as scientific, and also knowledge of values and much else beyond sense data. His positive argument, where he shows just what religious knowledge is, will be brought out later. But a strong negative argument may be brought up now. He points out that the positivist position is dogmatic and depends on an arbitrary definition of knowledge. For if knowledge is so defined, that statements based on other modes of verification than by sense data would not be knowledge, then any extension of the range of knowledge is blocked off by definition. All argu-
ment ceases. Such blocking off by definition, however, is clearly dogmatic. Besides, definitions will not obliterate facts. If other kinds of verification exist, they will continue to exist and operate whether a school of philosophers does or does not allow them to be defined as constituting knowledge. This demonstration of a dogmatism inherent in the positivist position seems to be irrefutable. So, this school of narrow intellectualism no longer stands in his way.

Bixler's treatment of the anti-intellectualist dogmatism of the Barthians is somewhat similar. They virtually define all intellectual evidence as irrelevant to religion. Consequently, anyone who presents a theology supported by rational arguments is automatically excluded from the society of the true religion. As with the positivists, the constructive answer is to produce a rational religion. But meanwhile negatively it is pertinent to point out that a rational religion cannot legitimately be rejected by defining religion as something irrational. Moreover, Bixler observes that there is something inconsistent in the irrationals writing books presenting reasons for the truth of a theory that is irrational. “That the Barthians in their zeal to avoid argument are to be numbered today among the most argumentative of men may well give us pause.” (Religion for Free Minds, New York, 1939, p. 63).

Having disposed of these two types of dogmatic opposition to a theory of religious knowledge, Bixler is then free to develop his constructive theory. Here he begins by calling attention to the reality of ideals. These are norms of values. And they are effective in human action and experience. Bixler approaches these norms much in the spirit of Plato. They are the standards we use in determining what is good and right. In using them we believe in them. We believe they have a source outside ourselves. We did not make them. And yet we are not sure we see them clearly. Our beliefs about them have to be modified as we work them out in our experience. The process of working them out, in applying them to our living and in our communal activity with other persons also working out their ideals, constitutes a verification process. The result of this process is a kind of knowledge. It is the beginning of religious knowledge.
Religious knowledge is thus distinct from scientific knowledge. It is knowledge of values, while scientific knowledge is of objects observed by the senses. But it is just as surely knowledge. It is founded on beliefs, and these beliefs are verified in our acts, in the experience of living. The verification is not so clean-cut as scientific verification can be, but it is just as trustworthy.

The verification of our beliefs in values, in our ideals, comes about through the harmony of their working in our life. They have to fit together and fit the world in which they operate. This process is often called coherence. The greater the degree of coherence our ideals attain the greater the degree of truth for our beliefs in them. Religious knowledge is thus a search for a harmony of values.

In this search Bixler points out there is a sort of rhythm which indicates a sort of philosophical dualism. It is the rhythm of testing and then thinking and then testing again and then thinking again. We apply our ideals to situations. They rarely quite fit. So then we retire from experience for a period of contemplation in which we adjust our ideals to attain greater coherence. Then we return to experience and test them again. This rhythm indicates a dualism of values and existence, of the ideal and the actual. It is a dualism much stressed in religious experience. But it is not a dualism which divides the world. On the contrary, it pulls the world together. It is just what leads to greater harmony and coherence. For there would be no adjustment of our values to overcome conflict if we did not put them to the test in existence and then think about them in essence.

This process brings out two other traits of religious experience—namely, commitment to one’s belief, and the importance of an awareness of suffering. In scientific knowledge no great stress is laid on commitment. But in religious belief this is vital. For it is through strong emotional commitment that our religious beliefs, our ideals, get fully tested in the stress of existence. How else would we become vividly aware of elements of falseness in our ideals, unless we applied them with complete commitment? How else could we be assured of their truth? For if we applied our ideals only half-heartedly, they
would be only half tested, like putting only half your weight on the ice to see how strong it is. You do not know whether it is strong enough to carry you or not. And sometime when you have to cross the ice, it may break through. So, full commitment is essential to religious belief. But, of course, such commitment is not contrary to the process of adjusting and harmonizing our beliefs where they are found incoherent. And there would be still, I take it, certain unchangeable and ultimate commitments such as belief in the truth of coherence itself as the basis for testing value.

The importance of the awareness of suffering is part of this process. Bixler makes a strong plea for a sense of suffering rather than a sense of sin. The sense of suffering is what our ideals are trying to alleviate. The verification of our ideals is precisely in their power to lessen suffering. So to be aware of the truth of our ideals is to be aware of the suffering they can reduce. A sense of suffering carries us and our ideals out into the world to make it better. But a sense of sin turns one inward and away from life. “Discussion of care, anxiety, and guilt,” writes Bixler, “has its morbid overtones. Youth does not accept them and neither should we. Pain and death must be brought out into the open as topics for reflection. The next step is to treat them with the perceptiveness that refuses to consider them final” (*A Faith that Fulfills*, New York, 1951, p. 75).

One can see in such a detail the vast contrast between the dogmatic, irrational religion of the Barthians, and particularly of Kierkegaard who wallows in anxiety and sin, and the liberal rational religion for which Bixler is pleading.

From the foregoing analysis of religious knowledge, Bixler is led to a highly sympathetic interpretation of mysticism. As one would imagine, it is not the solitary but the social mystic that Bixler idealizes. One of Bixler’s most eloquent and revealing essays on his philosophy is that on “The Mystic Way” from his *Four Approaches to Belief*, published in the *Iliff Review*, XIII-XIV, 1956.

Bixler is anxious to break down the conception of the mystic as espousing the irrational and so setting up a chasm between an ineffable experience and the processes of ordinary reasoning.
and perception with no communication between the two. "The great mystics," he says, "do not affirm this. On the further side of reason, they say, is something of serious import. We become inarticulate, it is true (they continue), when we try to talk about it. It must be said also that because it involves our own personal salvation, we cannot hope to share with you all the richness of its content. But to define it as some sort of split-off consciousness is to deny the facts. Our experience of God fits into a pattern with other experiences that are intelligible and communicable. . . . Once attained the vision brings results that are obviously good."

Bixler interprets the mystic experience as a supremely intense period of harmonious contemplation preparatory to a return into the stress and conflicts of common existence. It is one aspect of the cosmic rhythm, referred to earlier, between values and existence. And then Bixler enlarges upon the innumerable instances of social devotion which have followed after men have had the mystic experience or a genuine religious conversion.

Taking mysticism seriously leads to the question of our knowledge of God. For the mystic feels that he is in communication with God. Bixler asks what in this world would it be to have communication with God. It would not be literally seeing him or hearing him speak words. Such visions are the natural but irrelevant elaborations of ecstasy. For communication from God, "the ordinary means for the give and take of ideas are ruled out from the start," writes Bixler. "Nevertheless, I venture to say there is an experience common to all perceptive men and women that is incompletely described unless the word 'God' is used in accounting for it. . . . Each of us is aware of a claim laid upon us to make as much of our lives as we can. . . . It is the introduction of value that gives us something we can work on. It is the fact that we are placed here to do something of a special sort, to respond to a particular moral challenge, and to continue to improve our doing, along with our feeling and thinking that gives us a clue to the nature of God. . . . The mystic does indeed 'encounter' a reality outside himself. . . . He points to an influence playing on us of which both reason and conscience approve and which in every
sense deserves the term 'God-like.' He directs us to the Source of our values and increases our knowledge of this Source” ("The Mystic Way").

I give this extended quotation so that Bixler's argument at this important transition may be appreciated in his own words. It is an argument for the existence and nature of God by way of our sense of values and our practical commitment to the endeavor to realize them. It presupposes the reality of values as earlier established, our intellectual and emotional commitment to them, and lastly the coherence of experience which verifies them and in which we find ourselves immersed whenever they are about to be realized as true.

This last point is the final one I shall stress in this summary interpretation of Bixler's philosophy. The nature of God is found partly in his being the Source of the objective value norms which guide our living. But it is found equally in the process of living experience constantly striving for coherence. It follows that God is with us and working through us in proportion as we are being rational in the broad sense of attaining harmony out of conflict.

The following passage brings out this point: “There is more than a grain of truth in the old contention of the idealists that when our reflection is truly rational, when, as we say, reason truly ‘enters,’ then it is not we alone who think but God or the Spirit of Reason who thinks in us” ("The Mystic Way"). But we must not think, as the "old idealists" did, that somehow the coherence is all achieved in a hidden Absolute we cannot see, so that our struggles are all "appearance" beneath the transcendent "reality" of the Absolute. For Bixler the struggles are real and there is no transcendent Absolute. But there are objective values for which we may name God as their Source, and there is a continuous process of realizing these values through converting conflict and suffering into harmony and coherence. God is with us in our struggles and this is part of the nature of God. “God is greater than we but the greatness is of a sort we know and respect and find good. His difference is not in kind. . . . If God is the rational and ethical ideal, we can, however imperfectly, make his will our own, and can cooperate, however unworthily in the effort to carry out his purpose”
(The Faith that Fulfills, p. 60). By identifying part of God's nature with man's suffering and struggle towards harmony, it follows that God also suffers. Says Bixler, "Suffering must characterize the experience of God himself if he is a God of love" (Ibid., p. 56). It would follow too that he is a changing God who moves with the whole movement of human experience towards the coherent realization of his values.

Putting all the above together very briefly: There is scientific knowledge and there is religious knowledge. The first deals with the organization of the data of perception, the latter with the experiencing of values. Values have an objectivity beyond momentary experience and guide it towards coherence which is a form of rationality. God may be properly identified with these objective values and with the total movement of experience through suffering and conflict toward harmony and coherence. In this total movement scientific knowledge would be found to merge and cooperate with religious knowledge.

If this summary of Bixler's philosophy is essentially correct, it is a genuine synthesis of the theological and philosophical traditions. It is an original synthesis. The nearest philosophy to his I know is that of Whitehead in his last mature writings. But there are features in Bixler's philosophy that seem to be his alone.