SYMPHONIC THEOLOGY

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CHAPTER 1: PERSPECTIVES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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People are not all alike. They do not always notice the same thing even when they are looking at the same object. This commonplace observation has some profound implications for the way in which we do theology.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF PERSPECTIVES

Let us start with some simple illustrations. In figure 1, the drawing of the cube can appear to one person with vertex 1 in front and vertex 2 behind. Another person sees vertex 2 in front and vertex 1 behind. After looking at the figure for several seconds, most people find that the two views alternate. But a person busy with a problem in plane geometry might see the figure as simply a number of connected lines in one plane and not see a cube at all.

Figure 2 shows another picture that can be seen in two ways. If the viewer takes the black as a background, the picture is one of a white fountain. If the white is the background, the picture is a silhouette of two human faces looking at one another. This second example is an illuminating one, because many people at first see the diagram in only one way. They have to be told that there is another way of seeing it. We can say that two people can have different perspectives even when they see the same picture.

Something similar to these artificial examples can occur in ordinary situations. Suppose that two people are listening to the same speaker. One listener says, "He really has a good argument," but the other says, "He is insecure, he's hurting inside." Or a husband and wife are shopping for curtains. The wife says, "These are beautiful," while the husband says, "But they're no good: they don't block out the light."

Two people can be interested in different things and consequently notice different things about the same object. In the latter example, the husband looks for mechanical utility, while the wife looks for beauty. In listening to a speaker, one person studies the logic of an argument, while another listens to the tone and

style that reveal the person giving the argument. The people involved have differing perspectives on the same object.

Differences in what people see--differences in perspective--can obviously be useful. The husband and wife looking at the curtains may each agree that they overlooked something and that several factors need to be taken into account when they make their purchase. But the differences can also be exacerbating. The husband or wife might go away quarreling or fuming over their mate's evident lack of judgement.

Clearly, the matter of different perspectives is important in personal relationships. Getting along well with people involves recognizing some ways in which people are different as well as ways in which they are alike. In order to understand other people, we must be prepared to adopt their perspective, or to "wear their shoes," at least temporarily.

In pastoral counseling, ministers frequently find that part of their job is to help their counselees deal with quarrels that arise from differences in perspective. In fact, counselors themselves do better in their counseling if they are prepared to use more than one perspective. Frequently they need to pay attention simultaneously to what people are saying (their arguments and their logic) and to what they are revealing about themselves (their attitudes, emotions, etc.).

USE OF PERSPECTIVES IN NATURAL SCIENCE

Do differences of perspective occur also in academic disciplines? Do they play a role in chemistry, geology, economics, psychology, and the like? In the minds of many people, the "objectivity" and intellectual rigor of an academic discipline automatically exclude any use of perspectives. Especially the natural sciences seem to have no room for a personal individual input. Here we are after the truth as it really is, not the truth as seen by a particular individual with a particular limited perspective. And so people have often argued in favor of an ideal for science in which there is no longer any personal element.

But people are still human even when they are applying themselves to an academic discipline. It is really impossible for people to grasp objective truth except by using perspectives of one kind or another. Research in the history and philosophy of science has demonstrated this use of perspectives even within the natural sciences, the supposed domain of purely "objective" knowledge. 1

Every area of science employs key theoretical models, and each such model is a kind of perspective on the subject matter of science. Models and analogies play a key role in scientific discovery. They also contribute to the growth, improvement, and intellectual articulation of existing theories. Science seems to be objective

and to deal with universal knowledge partly because its practitioners within a particular field generally agree that one theoretical model or one theory--one "perspective"--has shown itself clearly superior and serves as a starting point for all further development.

The way in which models are used in natural science suggests implications for how we do theology. I explore these implications more fully in my book *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). For the moment, we may observe simply that perspectives are used in natural science.

USE OF PERSPECTIVES IN STUDYING HUMAN BEINGS

In the social sciences, in art and literature, and in all the academic disciplines that are concerned with human beings, the role of perspectives is even more obvious. First, the objects of study are users of perspectives, and surely an account of human beings must include an account of their capacity to use different perspectives.

Second, social scientists themselves, as well as the objects that they study, use perspectives. Hence we expect to see the social scientists using some key perspective, or model. For example, psychology has been divided for some time into various "schools," each one dominated by a single perspective. Freudian psychologists attempt to explain human beings in terms of biological drives, especially the sex drive. Behaviorists attempt to form explanations using as their dominant analogy stimulus-response experiments on animals. Humanist personality-theory approaches attempt to form explanations on the basis of the problem-solving and self-realizing capacities of human beings. Each one has a major perspective, a major beginning point in understanding human beings.

The use of perspectives is obviously fraught with danger. Like the husband or wife looking at the curtains, people with a single dominant perspective may see only what that perspective has trained them to see. For this reason, the schools of psychology tend toward reductionism. The Freudian is tempted to reduce human beings to animals that are controlled by drives. The behaviorist may reduce human beings to complex masses of stimulus-response patterns. 2

Dangers exist also because some perspectives incorporate anti-Christian assumptions that then condition all subsequent investigation. For example, behaviorists or personality theorists may assume that religion is merely a human means of coping with the cosmos and that God can be effectively eliminated from the study. It is unlikely that the results of their investigation will confirm the presence of God!

Even though there are dangers, some benefits may result. Behaviorists, for example, even with their faulty assumptions, may nevertheless discover some true things about human behavior. In fact, precisely because behaviorists concentrate reductionistically on just a few aspects of human experience, they may notice some things that others who look at the larger picture do not normally notice. They may describe some interesting stimulus-response patterns, even though such patterns are hardly the whole story.

Footnotes

1. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). On the use of models in science, see Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); Mary Hesse, *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966).

2. On reductionism, see especially Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969); Vern S. Poythress, *Philosophy, Science and the Sovereignty of God* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).