Book Reviews


Reviewed by John E. Bauer

As often happens, great expectations can set one up for eventual disappointment. Such was the case after reading R.C. Sproul’s recent book on Western philosophy. The promise of this book as a critical Christian analysis of the consequential intellectual movements of Western philosophy and the means for reasonably educated lay persons to formulate apologetic responses to such ideas was not realized. Instead, what this well known theologian and founder of Ligonier Ministries delivered was a relatively superficial textbook more suitable as a companion guide for PHI 101.

Setting aside my disappointment, this book does have merit if approached only as a brief survey of the discipline. Chapters are organized around the major philosophical systems in their historical order of emergence. Sproul tries to avoid the “apparatus of technicalia” in order to provide a text which is readable by the average lay person, but can’t seem to resist stating concepts in the philosopher’s terms without adequate explanation. I suppose the urge to remain succinct contributed to the density of expression. Unfortunately, the net result was beyond what most uninitiated readers can absorb.

The greatest disappointments, however, came in the concluding chapter. Sproul acknowledges that he had to make choices about which philosophers to include, “and one can argue that some philosophers I have omitted should have been included, and some I have included should have been excluded.” He sites as one example his exclusion of Dewey, Pierce, and James in the pragmatist movement, but then proceeds to spend several pages summarizing the major tenets of these philosophers anyway. One wonders why, if they are important enough to warrant mention and then explanation, that they weren’t included in the first place. Tacking them on as an after thought seems to reveal poor organization.

The greatest perplexity for this reviewer comes on the very last page of the book. Sproul writes,

“Those dissatisfied with any form of naturalism have sought desperately to regain contact with the transcendent, employing means ranging from skeptical fideism with its leap of faith, to irrational mysticism, occultism, and New Age techniques. Etienne Gilson has defined the god of modern philosophy as ‘mere by products born of the philosophical decomposition of the Christian living God’” (p.203).

Sproul then optimistically declares:

“As I enter the twilight years of my life, I am convinced that Gilson is fundamentally right. We need to reconstruct the classical synthesis by which natural theology bridges the special revelation of Scripture and the general revelation of nature. Such a reconstruction could end the war between science and theology. The thinking person could embrace nature without embracing naturalism. All of life, in its unity and diversity, could be lived coram Deo, before the face of God, under his authority and to his glory” (p.203).

I turned the page expecting a chapter which would then deliver this reconstruction. Instead of the needed synthesis called for by the author, the book crashed to a halt. I was left to stare at the end notes in bewilderment. The reconstruction of metaphysics called for by Sproul was nowhere to be found.

Having failed to deliver much insight into the consequences of ideas, the author should more honestly have entitled his book “Ideas of Consequence” and left it at that – a primer of philosophy. Instead, the analytic and apologetic service that could have been provided by this book for thoughtful Christian readers was neglected throughout and - most glaringly – the promised final bridge between science and theology was avoided.