

## [Escape From Reason \(Francis Schaeffer\)](#)

### Philosophy & Apologetics

Posted by: W. Simpson

Posted on : 2005/8/7 12:20:00

Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer (1912-1984), philosopher, theologian and the founder of L'Abri Fellowship, believed he had the answers to the dilemma of modern man.

In *Escape from Reason*, Schaeffer traces the development of modern man's despair of finding any meaning and purpose in life, culminating in the irrational "leap of faith" promoted by religious and secular existentialists in an effort to escape the intolerable futility of an empty, deterministic universe.

When we began to see the intellect as autonomous, and 'nature' set free from 'grace', Schaeffer argues, nature "ate up grace", removing the 'upper storey' (God the creator, heaven and heavenly things, the unseen and its influence on earth, man's soul, unity) from the rational sphere. Thinking independently of God's revelation, rationalistic man was unable to find any 'universals' (grace) which would give meaning and unity to all the particulars (nature). Once the particulars were set free, it proved impossible to hold them together. The results of man's failure came to a head in what Schaeffer called "the line of despair"; a point in history in which the philosophers abandoned their age-old hope of finding a unified answer for knowledge and life. The relativism that followed has shaped our thinking, our culture, and our theology.

The charge of beginning the real humanistic Renaissance and sowing the seeds for future despair is placed at the door of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the Christian philosopher and author of the famous "Summa theologica", widely read even today. Schaeffer pinpoints an inadequate view of the fall of man, which did not include man's intellect, as the door through which the belief in the autonomy of man's mind gained the predominance. On the basis of this autonomous principle, it came to be believed that theology (in the form of natural theology) and philosophy could be separated from revelation, and still arrive *independently* at truth.

The problems emerging from this view were soon expressed in the arts. Whilst initially, nature began to receive a proper emphasis in the paintings of men like Cimabue (1240-1302) and Giotto (1267-1337), it wasn't long before the higher ('grace') elements began to sink, and eventually lose their place in the picture altogether, exemplified progressively in the artwork of men like Van Eyck (1370-1441), Masaccio (1410-28), Filippo Lippi (1406-69) and then Fouquet (1416-1480).

By the time of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), neoplatonism was in vogue, as men looked for a way to reinstate ideas and ideals – the 'universals' they needed to give meaning and unity to all the 'particulars'. According to Schaeffer, it had begun to dawn on da Vinci that, if you begin with an autonomous rationality, you will *never* get beyond mere mechanics - you simply won't break free of the particulars. It was a conclusion that was unacceptable to Leonardo da Vinci, however, a man who realised the need for a unity between 'nature' and 'grace'. So he struggled on, but without any success, and died in frustration and despondency.

By the time of Kant (1724-1804) and Rousseau (1712-78), rationalism was well-developed and the

philosophical problem was now defined, not in terms of 'nature' and 'grace', but in terms of 'nature' and 'freedom', the concept of revelation having been tossed aside in an intellectual environment that was now decidedly secular. Nature had, at last, become so autonomous that determinism had begun to emerge - and it was beginning to eat up people! Kant's struggle to reconcile the phenomenal world of nature and the noumenal world of universals, in an effort to retain human freedom, was continued by Rousseau and his followers. Despite the pressure, they tenaciously clung to the hope that, by means of "rationalism plus rationality", they would find the complete answer that would encompass and unite everything.

Entering the stage after a long line of failures, Hegel (1779-1831) was the man who finally opened the door to "the line of despair". Up to this point, Schaeffer states, there were three things that had united the Western schools of philosophy in all their thinking: 1) They were *rationalists*, which means they believed that "man begins absolutely and totally from himself, gathers information concerning the particulars, and formulates the universals". 2) They believed in the *rational*, acting "upon the basis that man's aspiration concerning the validity of reasoning was well founded" and thinking "in terms of antithesis" (if a certain thing was believed to be true, then it's opposite was thought to be false; A is A and not non-A). 3) They hoped that, by means of rationalism plus rationality, they would arrive at "a unified field of knowledge". Hegel's relativism was to change all that, and change the world!

Hegel argued that the thinking of the past had basically failed; again and again, one theory had been erected only to be pushed down by the next, and there seemed no end to this vicious circle. In place of this 'philosophic humanistic thought', which was getting nowhere, Hegel relinquished the rational (2), but retained the rationalism (1); instead of thinking in terms of *antithesis* (A is A and not non-A), Hegel proposed that the answers were to be found in *synthesis* (A and non-A). Here lies fallen man's rebellion, says Schaeffer: "Man will keep his rationalism... his insistence on total autonomy or partially autonomous areas, even if it means he must give up his rationality". "Truth as truth is gone" and now "relativism reigns".

Following Hegel, Kierkegaard (1813-55) becomes Schaeffer's symbol of "the real modern man" who has finally abandoned the hope of a unified field of knowledge. The original problem had been formulated in terms of 'nature' and 'grace', and then 'freedom' and 'nature'. Now with Kierkegaard, it has finally degenerated into a dichotomy between 'faith' and 'rationality', separated by a vast chasm that no amount of rational thinking can bridge. Meaning and truth are now disconnected from reason and knowledge; if we are to attain them, we have no alternative but to make an irrational "leap of faith".

The new philosophy – or anti-philosophy – wasn't kept bottled up in an ivory tower. Hegelian relativism and Kierkegaardian irrationalism filtered down to the masses in three different ways; it spread *geographically* from Germany outward, penetrating Holland and Switzerland, then reaching England, taking some time to arrive in America; it spread through the *classes*, beginning with the intellectuals and then, through the mass-media, infiltrating the workers ranks (but failing to penetrate the middle-classes); it spread through the *disciplines*, beginning with philosophy (Hegel), then art (the post-impressionists), then music (Debussy), then general culture (early T.S. Eliot), and finally theology (Karl Barth). The hope of finding a unified field of knowledge is gone. Modern man now lives in despair – "the despair of no longer thinking that what has always been the aspiration of men and women is at all possible".

But all this proves too much for man; "he cannot live merely as a machine". This new, modern

thinking slices him into a cruel dichotomy, where any meaning, any values and any hopes must be obtained irrationally. "What makes modern man modern", Schaeffer observes, "is the existence of this dichotomy and not the multitude of things he places, as a leap, in the upper storey." Since no one can live consistently within this system, they must steal things from elsewhere, in order to live their lives, often plucking them (out of context) from a Christian worldview.

This escape from reason was objectified in the secular and religious existentialism that followed. On the secular side, Jean-Paul-Sartre (1905-80) talked about 'authenticating' yourself by an act of the will. What you actually *do*, however, is neither here nor there – so long as you do something! Jaspers (1883-1969), on the other hand, pointed to a 'final experience' that somehow imparts a certainty that you are really there and gives some hope of meaning. But being an irrational experience, it cannot be shared, and is difficult to retain. Heidegger (1889-1976) spoke of *angst* – a vague feeling of dread – as something upon which to hang everything. And on the religious wing, Karl Barth believed that, whilst the Bible contains mistakes (the so-called 'higher criticism'), there was actually no rational interchange between the upper and lower spheres and we should believe it anyway, expecting a 'religious word' to be imparted nevertheless.

The irony of modern man – which is prevented from being comic only insofar as it is tragic – is that the autonomic intellectual enterprise, initiated through man's self-confidence in his power to independently reason his way to the answers, has ended, not in the triumph of rationality, but in its actual *abandonment*. By clinging to his autonomy, man has lost his rationality. His reason has been engulfed by his rationalism. Man remains at the centre of the universe, still clinging to a hope, but without any rational basis.

Schaeffer's solution is simple. Christianity has the answer to the very thing modern man has despaired of ever finding: a unified answer for the whole of life. True, it demands that we abandon our rationalistic autonomy and return to the reformation view of the Holy Scriptures, but in so doing we get back our *rationality*, our meaningfulness, and ourselves. Authentic Christianity constitutes no existential leap into an irrational upper sphere. Schaeffer insists that the Bible speaks truth "both about God Himself and about the area where the Bible touches history and the cosmos." Man can have his answers to life "on the basis of what is open to verification and discussion". And a unified answer to life is, Schaeffer asserts, what man really wants! "He did not accept the line of despair and the dichotomy because he wanted to. He accepted it because, on the basis of the natural development of his rationalistic presuppositions, he had to. He may talk bravely at times, but in the end it is despair." In truth, "Modern man longs for a different answer than the answer of his damnation". Christianity, with its reasonable and consistent framework for understanding the world we live in, can put an end to this despair by putting man right with God.

---

I have tried to simply summarise Schaeffer's thought in this article, rather than critique it. It is worth mentioning, however, that Schaeffer probably missed his target in identifying Aquinas as the originator of the humanistic Renaissance, however correctly he may have traced the contours of Western thought.