

THE BALNIBARBIAN HERESIES

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The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary color, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in. -- C.S. Lewis

Far away on the other side of the world is a marvelous land named Balnibarbi. As we learn from Mr. Gulliver, its capital is the great city of Lagado, and in this place is an even greater Academy, filled with the most brilliant people in the world. Unfortunately, Gulliver was able to stay at Lagado Academy for only a short while, and there were many interesting things about the Academy that he did not have an opportunity to find out. Having recently taken the opportunity for a longer visit, I offer my findings to readers in the Western hemisphere.

The oldest and most honorable department in the entire Academy of Lagado is devoted to the study of color. Indeed, philosophy of color has been studied in Balnibarbi for something like twenty-four centuries. It was the Balnibarbian scholars, for instance, who first discovered that all of the colors in the universe come from just three primaries, yellow, red, and blue. The details are well-known even in our part of the world: Orange is derived from red and yellow, green is derived from blue and yellow, purple is derived from blue and red, and so on. Of course the primary colors themselves are not derived from anything.

Unfortunately, over the last few hundred years the great tradition of Balnibarbian color philosophy has degenerated, as wave upon wave of intellectual revolution has swept the Lagado Academy. Those few scholars who still believe in the doctrine of primary colors are now considered reactionary, retrograde, regressive; in a word, not Smart. The three main parties of Progress are the Monochromes, the Antichromes, and the Neochromes.

The *Monochromes* object to the theory of primary colors because they don't think it goes far enough. In their view, it's all well and good to say that orange comes from the primary colors red and yellow, purple comes from the primary colors red and blue, and so on -- but what, they ask, is the *ultimate* basis of color? They reason that there must be an *even more* primary color than yellow, red, or blue -- a *fundamental* color from which even the primary colors are derived. For instance, some of the Monochromes think the color from which all colors come is chartreuse. Others think it puce. The latest Monochromes identify it as plaid. A party of compromise, the Polychromes, works hard to miss the point: it tries to reconstruct

the spectrum with primary colors of chartreuse, puce, *and* plaid. Although these theories have disappointing consequences for interior decorating, they are bold and original, and to be bold and original is of course the end of scholarship.

The *Antichromes* are the next party. Although they too reject the theory of primary colors, with their keener rods and cones they see right through the Monochromes. Chartreuse couldn't be the fundamental color, they observe, because all one can derive from it is various shades of greenish-yellow. Likewise puce couldn't be the fundamental color, because all one can derive from it is various shades of purplish-brown. Finally, plaid couldn't be the fundamental color because it isn't a color at all. The truth, say the Antichromes, is that there is *no* fundamental color from which even the primary colors can be derived. This is the crux. For if there is no fundamental color, then color has no Ultimate Basis; and if color has no Ultimate Basis, then color isn't real. This logic is so far beyond previous semblances of reason that it might almost be considered a new logic altogether. Its conclusions are equally breathtaking: Everything that we call a color is just a figment of our imagination, a projection of some desperate human desire onto a universe of cold and monotonous shades of gray. For discovering the tragic truth, expressed in their motto, "Color is Dead," the Antichromes are rightly praised as pioneers. They eat only burnt toast and milk, and watch only black-and-white television.

Finally we come to the *Neochromes*, the most avant-garde party of all. They agree with the Antichromes that color has no Ultimate Basis; they agree that the universe is gray, hue and tint existing only in our imaginations; they agree that we create the blue of the night and the blush of the rose in our minds, rather than somehow discovering them in the order of things. But what, they ask, is so tragic about that? Is it not liberating? Smash the palettes! Pulverize the prisms! Away with the tyranny of yellow, red, and blue! The creator of color is MAN! Because of their verve and dash, the Neochromes, like the Monochromes, divide into factions. Individualist Neochromes say that every human being is entitled to his own primary colors. Communitarian Neochromes object that permitting every human being his own primary colors would lead to difficulty with traffic signals and things of that sort; although every *country* is entitled to its own primary colors, they say, individuals must toe the line. In the end, however, communitarianism comes to pretty much the same thing as individualism because no two communitarians can ever agree upon the spectrum their country should use. In a sort of compromise, they usually wind up mixing all the colors together and painting everything a tepid shade of brown. Even so they quarrel over whether to use maple, beige, or taupe.

We too have a great tradition. Just as the Balnibarbians learned long ago that all color in the universe is derived from just a few primary colors, so we learned long ago that all moral law in the universe is derived from just a few primary moral laws. Just as the primary colors are the same for everyone, so these natural laws are the same for everyone. Just as the primary colors are understood by all who hear of them, so these natural laws are recognized by all who

hear of them. Just as the primary colors do not have to be derived from anything because they are the *source* of the other colors, so the natural laws do not have to be derived from anything because they are the source of the other moral laws. And just as the Balnibarbians have lost their ancient wisdom about color, so we have lost our ancient wisdom about morality. The colorblind lead the colorblind, and the blind the blind.

Let us further explore the parallel. In the first place we have thinkers who treat moral law as the Monochromes treat color. They insist on some ultimate value which they rank as even more fundamental than the natural law. As to what this ultimate value is, they divide, some naming pleasure, some naming liberty, some naming another value such as privacy. Working hard, like the Polychromes, to miss the point, a party of compromise tries to reconstruct the moral law from fundamental values of pleasure, liberty, *and* privacy. Despite all their disagreement, these thinkers have one thing in common: Any moral law that cannot be traced to their ultimate value they simply ignore. In this way they manage to ignore quite a bit.

In the second place we have thinkers who treat moral law as the Antichromes treat color. They insist that there is no real good and evil, no real right and wrong, and that the universe is merely an enormous screen onto which we project our desires and call them moral laws. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, the granddaddy of all such theorizers, God is dead, so everything is permitted.

Finally we have thinkers who treat moral law as the Neochromes treat color. Just as Neochromes think that human beings can create new primary colors, so these thinkers insist that human beings can create new and different moralities. Of course, this is absurd. If someone claimed to have created new primary colors, you could be sure that he had merely made a new blend of the old ones, and the same is true for the primary principles of good and evil.

For instance, you can make up a new rule that killing infants is right instead of wrong. Nobody can stop you. But if you want to get pregnant young women to believe it, the only way to do it is to confuse them about the moral laws they already know. Your first step will certainly be to turn down the volume on the law of love, which commands sacrificial care for the young, the innocent, and the helpless with whom God has trusted us. After that you might want to turn up the volume on the far less important law of shame, which commands avoidance of scandal. If you can induce hysteria and a feeling of being trapped, then you may even be able to make an illegitimate appeal to the law of self-preservation. Is it clear how this works? Just like a painter who likes two of the primary colors, dislikes the third primary color, and, after a little mixing, claims to have invented a new one.

Is our situation hopeless? I don't think so. True, not only the discipline of moral philosophy but the culture itself seems to be going down the tubes, and I think that if we had to

save ourselves, we would be in a sorry state indeed. But what is impossible for man is possible for God; the faith itself got its first big chance during the era when Roman virtue was in decay. That didn't mean that Rome was preserved. Nevertheless a new civilization rose from its ashes.

For the teacher, faith is renewed by classroom experience. During a recent semester I taught Aristotle's *Ethics*. A young man came to me after class and said, "Professor, I've got to tell you that I'm getting scared." I asked him why. He replied, "Because you're scaring me. I'm shaking." I asked him, "How am I doing that?" He replied, "It's Aristotle. In this book of his he keeps talking about virtue." I asked him, "So?" He replied, "It's making me realize that I don't lead a virtuous life. And I'm shaking." The gospel of John teaches that the Holy Spirit came to bring the world conviction of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment; I never thought He might use a pagan philosopher to do it.

On another occasion I was approached by a student who had spent months devouring not ancient, but contemporary works of ethical and political theory -- the sort of thing they study at Lagado Academy. He told me that he had been thinking about God, something he had never done before. He asked, "Do you think I'm crazy?" When I replied "No," he was greatly relieved. But I asked, "What first made you think of God?" He replied, "None of these writers says anything about Him, and it seems to me that they're building their theories on nothing." The lesson was clear; his books had made him think of God not because they spoke of Him but because they did not. As in the dark night of John of the Cross, God had manifested Himself by the very fact of his apparent absence.

What does it mean to profess Christ in a university and world that seem bent on re-paganizing themselves? Pagans had the natural law. Christians have more than the natural law, because they have the gospel. Neo-pagans have less. This paradox requires explanation.

In one sense, of course, nobody can have less than the natural law: for its primary principles are nothing but those principles of right and wrong that we can't not know. As Paul explained in his letter to the Romans, God has written His law even on the hearts of the nations. This is why they had consciences just like Jews and Christians did. The law written on the heart is a birthright; it comes with being human.

But in another sense, anybody can have less than the natural law, for as each of us knows perfectly well, it's possible to know something at one level and yet deny it at another. We can't get rid of the law written on the heart, but we can try to write over it. The abortion movement, for instance, is a vast collective exercise in denial: an effort to expunge the guilt of killing one's children, not by repenting and throwing oneself upon the Lord of Mercy, but by getting others to join in the killing. Consciously, the activists deny that they have broken the natural law; unconsciously, they know they have and seek absolution in politics. What goes

for many social movements goes double for many academic theories. In large part, denial is what the post-Christian University is about.

Just as Paul talked about the truths about God and his law that we can't not know, so he talked about the spiritual consequences of pretending that we don't know what we really do.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind. (Romans 1:21-22a, 28a.)

What I take this to mean is: If we throw away the knowledge that we don't want, we will lose the knowledge that we do want; if we try to deform our intellects, God will let us. The University may have forgotten that, but the heart remembers.