

**Demythologising Liberalism:
Greg Bahnsen reviews Roberto Unger's
Knowledge and Politics
By Dr. Greg Bahnsen**

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Knowledge and Politics*, (New York: The Free Press, Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975), 336 pages, with index; \$12.95, Reviewed by Greg L. Bahnsen, The Chalcedon Foundation, California.

Roberto M. Unger, who teaches at the Harvard Law School, has presented to the public what is in many respects a fascinating book. Consider its breadth: psychology, social theory, religion, epistemology, politics, metaphysics, ethics, and history (among other things) are all treated in an interwoven fashion. Consider its depth: every major philosopher from Plato to Quine, in every major tradition, not to mention socio-political theorists from right to left, psychologists, and modern theologians are discussed and footnoted. The author is obviously well-read, and he reads well. Unger shows an understanding and insightfully relates the central themes of modern thought and politics. His book aims to take on the entire ruling mentality of modern (i.e., post-Hobbesian) philosophy and social theory, and it climaxes with an essay on God.

The author's grasp of material and his scope of treatment are astonishing. Moreover, his prose can be overpowering. Consider the opening and closing paragraphs of his Introduction.

In its ideas about itself and about society, as in all its other endeavors, the mind goes from mastery to enslavement, which imitates the attraction death exercises over life, thought again and again uses the instruments of its own freedom to bind itself in chains. But whenever the mind breaks its chains, the liberty it wins is greater than the one it had lost, and the splendor of its triumph surpasses the wretchedness of its earlier subjection... No one who has heard a whispered intimation of the power and greatness of theory will ever surrender to despair, not will he doubt that this sound of thought will one day awaken the stones themselves.

Without a doubt *Knowledge and Politics* is a grandiose book. Its intent is revolutionary, aiming to supplant the paradigms of liberalism and establish a new mode of thought. All factors considered, the book should be read by Christians studying in the areas of philosophy, social science, and psychology.

According to Unger, the time has come for a *total* criticism of what he designates the *liberal* system or mode of thought - the tradition, which has dominated Western culture since the 1600's with respect to the conceptions of man and society. This classical outlook, he thinks, cannot be remedied of its inevitable antinomies by the piecemeal criticisms advanced by specialized sciences, for each partial critique tacitly accepts postulates of liberalism while simultaneously rejecting others; however, the principles of liberalism (from psychology to political theory) are interdependent. Thus partial critiques cannot get beyond the problems inherent in the system. Specifically, the premises of liberalism lead to irreconcilable conclusions: "the house of reason in which I was working proved to be a prison-house of paradox whose rooms did not connect and whose passageways led nowhere."

A time for a total revolution in thought and political practice has arrived then. The tyranny of the classical theory of liberalism must be broken. This tyranny is expressed in both the theory of knowledge and political theory; indeed, these two areas are actually interdependent. The author contends that there is "a continuum of accessible truth that bridges the distance from the study of knowledge to the understanding of individual conduct, from the understanding of individual conduct to the science of society, and from the science of society to the exercise of political choice." In my opinion, it is just here that Unger's brilliance is most evident. Throughout his book he reveals underlying continuities between various metaphysical or epistemological stances and corresponding social and political outlooks. The inter-relation of a person's opinions (from knowledge to politics) - over against a strongly departmentalized conception - needs to be stressed and illustrated today, and Unger begins to fulfill that need.

Unger contends that liberalism's views in epistemology, psychology, and ethics can be reduced to a few basic principles which depend upon one another in a quasi-logical sense. However, these principles produce antinomies regarding the self and morals; thereby the idea of personality is subverted. Again, the moral beliefs and political ideas of liberalism can be summarized in a few basic postulates which form a closed system, a system that results in an antinomy regarding public rules and private ends. Further, the liberal principles of psychology and politics imply each other, constituting a single body of thought, but one which is riddled with paradoxes. Unger attempts to relate these difficulties in liberal thought to its misguided conception of the relationship between parts and wholes in knowledge and in society. Finally, "to solve the antinomies of liberal thought, replace its view of parts and wholes, and work toward a different system of psychological and political ideas, we must abandon the manner in which our modern schools conceive the relationship of universals to particulars."

Only a short example of how the above contentions are elaborated is possible here. According to Unger, the modern conception of nature rejects the doctrine of intelligible essences, thus leading to Kant's view that facts can be perceived solely through the categories with which the mind orders experience. And yet liberalism believes that the history of science is progressive, that a rational choice is possible among conflicting theories about the world. What we see, then, is that liberal epistemology simultaneously holds that knowledge is theoretical (mediated by mental constructs) and observational (directly in touch with the facts). What is basic here is the conviction that there is a *separation* between the universal (e.g., the category of the understanding) and the particular (e.g., the objective source of sensation).

Furthermore, liberal doctrine distinguishes reason from desire, and it holds the latter to be arbitrary. The final outcome of such tenets is a clash between deontological and teleological ethical systems, both of which are demanded by liberalism, and yet neither is adequate. Consequently, the concept of a person who has a continuing identity over time, who shares a common humanity with others, who can alter his ends and be a unique individual, is destroyed by the conflict between an ideal humanity (enshrined in a morality of reason) and a concrete humanity (enshrined in a morality of desire). Schizophrenia results, only to be aggravated by the surrogate "personality" offered in one's social role. To escape this quandry, says the author, we need to get beyond the idea of *aggregation* (everything is a sum of its parts) and the primacy of the *simple*, wherein the complex and synthetic are always viewed as derivative and contrived (whether in knowledge or in politics). But this requires a novel view of the relation of universals to particulars. A similar discussion could be rehearsed with respect to rules and values in political thought.

Well then, what the author says is that liberalism, by rejecting intelligible essences, cannot escape antinomies in knowledge and politics - antinomies which *require* and yet render *impossible* the separation of the universal (e.g., theory, reason, rules) and the particulars (e.g., facts, desires, values). He thinks that all the fundamental issues of modern philosophy are variations on such antinomies: viz., form and substance must be both independent and interdependent. As Professor Cornelius Van Til said over forty years ago, modern philosophy is broken over the problem of "the one and the many" (cf. R.J. Rushdoony's *The One and the Many*, Nutley, J.J.: The Craig Press).

Unger finds a faint suggestion of the way out of liberalism's riddle in moral, artistic, and religious experience. He feels that the universal must always exist as a concrete particular, yet never be exhausted in its meaning or possible modes of existence by any single particular instantiation of it. The universal is neither abstract and formal, nor identified with a single concrete particular. "Instead, it is an entity whose universality consists precisely in the open set of concrete and substantive determinations in which it can appear" - somewhat like a person (the universal) who is manifest in various bodily ages and positions (the particulars). The author finds an example of

this view in the Christian doctrines of Incarnation and Resurrection. God, the infinite and universal being, became man, a finite and particular being; resurrected men will be purged of everything finite and contingent and yet continue as individual beings in the next world. In the book-ending essay on God, Unger says that the question of the universal and particular is, religiously stated, the puzzle of immanence and transcendence. Liberalism can be surpassed only in the historical conjunction of immanence (union) and transcendence (separation). Then can be realized Unger's theory of the self (as existing in natural harmony, sympathy toward others, and concrete universality respecting internal ideals) and theory of organic groups (communities with shared values and no antagonism between domination and individualism).

However, says Unger, the character of the world and of man's place in it make reconciliation between immanence and transcendence necessarily and permanently impossible. The union of the two must be looked for in God. In his last pages the author engages in the (ancient) *via negativa* and (medieval) natural theology; he uses speculative thought, reflecting on man and his imperfections, to determine what the perfect being, God, would have to be. *If* there is such a God, he *could not* be man in history. The power of speculative thought, says Unger, stops here. Whether God exists, as well as the salvation of men, can be known only by God's own direct self-revelation. Here philosophy, which is sovereign in its own province, must end and give way to an immediate experience of the truth not amenable to argument (religion).

When philosophy has gained the truth of which it is capable, it passes into politics and prayer, politics through which the world is changed, prayer through which men ask God to complete the change of the world by carrying them into His presence and giving them what, left to themselves, they would always lack.

The author indicates that he looks for a revelation which will tell us how the opposition of humanity and nature are to be overcome, how the conflict of self and others can be resolved, and "how our participation in Him might give us the hope that we too might be able in another world to join together at last essence and existence, the abstract and the concrete self." Saying that men look unceasingly for God, Unger ends with these telling words: "But our days pass, and still we do not know you fully. Why then do you remain silent? Speak, God."

Knowledge and Politics is a remarkable treatise, but it has great weaknesses. Space does not allow the enumeration of many of them. However, the reader should be aware that Unger is throughout attacking a non-existent entity; the set of ideas he calls liberalism groups together too many strange bedfellows to be convincing. Despite his early apology, the author does not overcome the problem that no one thinker accepts the liberal theory as he exposit it. This greatly weakens his charge of *antinomy* in the alleged system of "liberalism" and his only recourse is to say that his hypothetical

system of thought (an admitted reconstruction) contains tenets which are *not liberally* mutually entailed. Unger wants to speak of an analogy of logical entailment between them, but it is far from clear what this analogy amounts to. It seems to give him what he wants in the way of criticizing liberalism, and yet rescues him from the counter-criticism that he is attacking a straw-man.

Unger would have done better to simply say the object of his criticism was modern philosophy in its many guises, rather than reducing this wide range of opinion to one alleged school. His criticisms at particular points are impressive, but applied to the whole are unconvincing. In order to categorize all of modern philosophy we would need to expand our label from liberalism to autonomous unbelief in the Christian Scriptures, and this category would include Unger himself. Despite his suggestive idea of finding the resolution of the one and many problem (for epistemology and politics) in God, it is obvious that he embraces an incorrect theology (God is treated as infinite being, into whose essence man might merge and be purged of finitude) and misguided methodology (granting autonomy to philosophy in finding God, then seeking a nonrational experience in religion to complete the quest for the Deity). Yes, the problem of the one and the many can only be answered in God. Yes, only in God's revelation can nature and humanity, individuals and society, learn to exist in harmony. However, our answer and our salvation can only be found in the Triune God of the Bible, the sovereign Creator who is ever separate from the creature and yet always active in us and our world, the God of truth who has revealed Himself clearly to all men. By asking that God *finally* speak, and by saying that God is personal *if* He exists, Unger exhibits his rebellion against the living and true God. Therefore, the author has rightly seen the troubles of others but overlooked his own fatal mistake. As Van Til has compellingly shown, unless one begins by presupposing the ontological Trinity of Scripture, he cannot be immune from the one-and-many problem or from intellectual futility.

Therefore, Unger's book has many fine sections and suggestions. It does witness to the fact that modern philosophy and politics can find their solutions only in God. But when we look at Unger's thought itself, it must be clear that the Christian can in no way take him as "the straight man" for whom the apologist can now give "the punch line." Unger has misconceived the problem as well as the solution; we must not only get beyond "liberalism," but beyond *autonomy*. And that takes us beyond Unger to the rock-word of Jesus Christ, the *transcendent* Creator who became *immanent* in history to be the Savior of man, his thinking and his society.