

A PIONEER OF THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICS

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De veritate non disputandum.

When we characterize the main object of modern significs (or psycho-linguistics) as that of paying more attention to the subconscious factors which determine the *use* and the *effect* of linguistic means than to their *form*, it follows that for the consistent significist many a problem that has occupied for centuries the minds of philosophers, moralists or theologians has no direct meaning at all but is merely a question of preference for one form of speech or another: "pseudo-problems", as we say now, "flatus vocis" as William Occam used to call them.

But it is also obvious, that the significal point of view often enables us to detect wishes, fears or psychical dispositions underlying such a problem, which its originator was not clearly aware of, and in those cases the pseudo-problem may be said to have a real *symptomatical* meaning, the analysis of which may be of the utmost individual, social or even biological importance (*improper pseudo-problems*).

The critical analysis of philosophical concepts and formulae is certainly by no means a monopoly of the significal and semantic movement of these days and far less so that of the Dutch branch of that movement, but nevertheless I think it may be said, that here in Holland we significists from the beginning have been more deeply interested in the psychical substrata of ideological problems and pseudo-problems than was the case in other centres of epistemological criticism, such as the Vienna circle, the Unity of Science Movement or the Korzybski-school of "General Semantics". And so it may be of some moment to commemorate here the hundredth anniversary of the birthday (on 13 IX 1846) of a man, who rightly may be regarded upon as the very pioneer of theological significs in our country and abroad: the baptist minister (1892—1916 professor in the Department of theology of the Amsterdam University)

I. J. LE COSQUINO DE BUSSY.

In the 1939 issue of this journal our collaborator N. WESTENDORP BOERMA (in more than one respect one of DE BUSSY's successors) has introduced to our readers one of the most far-reaching parts of the manuscripts DE BUSSY left behind¹), and so we may confine ourselves

¹) Synthese IV 1939, p. 540—543: N. Westendorp Boerma "De ethische wijsgeer I. J. de Bussy", and p. 544—553: I. J. de Bussy "Egoïsme en altruïsme" (being an abstract from "De Wetenschap der Moraal, door I. J. de Bussy, bewerkt naar manuscripten door J. Maarse en N. Westendorp Boerma", Amsterdam 1939, to be quoted below as W. d. M.).

here to pointing out some features of DE BUSSY's ideas that strike us as most nearly akin to what we nowadays think to be the nucleus of significant insight and significant research, i.e. the sharp distinction between volition and perception and between the (often inextricably intermingled) linguistic means corresponding to these polarly opposite trends of all mental life (*psychical and linguistical duality and polarity*)²⁾

I don't mean to say that the distinction here referred to has always clearly be seen and kept in mind by DE BUSSY. On the contrary, he often uses "I"-words (like "egoism" and "altruism") to indicate "It"-phenomena (like the self-preserving and the group-preserving trends we may observe in every behavioristic or physiological phenomenon of human, animal or botanical life), but when he does so, he feels strongly the insufficiency of his indications and tries honestly and courageously (for thinking often requires more courage than swinging a battle-axe!) to remedy it. And often succeeds admirably.

So for instance when he compares the opposition "egoism-altruism" (here meant in the "it"-sense of the words) with the opposition of two tastes (sweet or sour), of whom now the one and now the other gives us a sensation of pleasure and displeasure, and arrives at the conclusion: "Likewise egoism as a psychical phenomenon is not always morally rejected nor altruism accepted and often they may coincide in a most healthy way."³⁾

Or once again, when he clearly indicates the subjective (volitional) character of such a term as "selfishness" and defines it as that degree of egoism (in the above sense) we reject in a given situation.⁴⁾

Or again, when he turns his attention to the many rejecting or accepting terms in common use (bearers and transmitters of the *sub-moral* of a more or less extended group!), even trying to classify them according to their grammatical function⁵⁾, thus following the only trend of thought that may lead us out of the riddles of moralizing philosophy to the strongest bulwark against self-deception: the empirical research of socio-biological phenomena.⁶⁾

The science of the creeds and that of the morals of man (theology and ethics) are closely connected but not identical, and so it is not to be wondered, that DE BUSSY met with the greatest difficulties when trying

²⁾ Comp. G. Mannoury "Relativisme en Dialektiek. Schema ener filosofisch-sociologische grondslagenleer" (with Synopses in English, Russian and Esperanto. Bussum 1946).

³⁾ W. d. M. p. 257: "Zoo wordt ook egoïsme als psychisch feit door ons niet slecht geoordeeld noch altruïsme goed, en menigwerf kunnen zij op gezonde wijze samenvallen."

⁴⁾ W. d. M. p. 261: "...zelfzucht, kunnen wij zeggen, is dat soort eigenliefde, waarop door ons een blaam geworpen wordt..."

⁵⁾ I. J. de Bussy "Het zedelijk beoordeelen" I (Amsterdam, J. H. de Bussy, 1920) p. 127.

⁶⁾ Comp. G. Mannoury "Sociobiology" (Synthese V 1947 p. 522—525).

to apply his (strictly speaking: relativistic) ethical views to theological matters and especially so when he deals with the most fundamental problem in theology: the "objective" or "subjective" value of faith, and more particularly of one's *own* faith. In his writings on this subject DE BUSSY struggles with a terminology, that is not in the least adequate to the subtle task of dissecting the psychical correlates of ideological language. On the one hand he strongly and often eloquently supports the stand-point that no religious conception may be regarded as the expression of a "objective truth"⁷⁾, on the other hand he maintains, no less strongly and no less eloquently, the moral value of the same conceptions and the validity of the ideas necessarily connected with them⁸⁾ and we can easily imagine how bewildering an effect such an inconsistency in his words (and probably to a certain extent also in his thoughts) must have exercised on every reader, who struggled with the same problem. . . . without ever asking whether *is* is a problem at all and whether "general assertions" (All-Aussagen) like objectivity, validity, reality and the like are not in most cases merely used as "strong language", expressing very deep personal and subjective convictions? They all belong to the same linguistic family: the family of *group*-words, indicating the mental adherence of the speaker to the group that uses them in the same circumstances as he does himself.

The difficulty is, that this point of view must necessarily seem disparaging to those who can only speak and think in their own group-language, and never tried to understand another. But not so for the impartial investigator of "groupwill", its origin and its symptoms. To him it is no "error" to call a phenomenon "the work of God" and no blasphemy to call it a phenomenon, and to him it is no disparagement to say that his deepest convictions in the last instance are "only" his *own* convictions, provided he feels them strongly enough to maintain his mental equilibrium for life. . . .

And as to LE COSQUINO DE BUSSY: it is my personal conviction, that we may safely honour him as an unwavering seeker for a pathway in the wilderness of human words and thoughts, without forgetting that the work of the pioneer has no "absolute value" without the vigorous efforts of his followers to widen the ways assigned!

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⁷⁾ I. J. de Bussy "De maatstaf van het zedelijk oordeel en het voorwerp van het godsdienstig geloof" (Amsterdam, J. H. de Bussy, 1889) p. 87.

⁸⁾ Ibidem, p. 131.