

On Philosophers Misunderstood

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Sometimes philosophers have been misunderstood. It could be because the philosopher's communication was vague. It could also be because the philosopher didn't use Ockham's razor and multiplied terms unnecessarily forcing reviewers to impose the razor, with the result that what needs to be cut is not cut and what was essential is taken out of the equation. But, it could also be because the reviewer was too much in a hurry and his choice of sample writings and quotes interpreted in light of his hypothesis of what the philosopher might be meaning committed the fallacy of hasty generalization (even if his critique of the philosopher was voluminous). Whatever, it is an unfortunate sight when one observes that a scholar may have misinterpreted another scholar and the other scholar is alarmed that that is not what he meant. Some philosophers give rise to various conflicting schools of interpretation; to quote an example, the left Hegelian and the right Hegelian schools that emerged as a result of conflicting interpretations of Hegel; the former are anti-Christian, the latter, pro-Christian. Again, one asks whose fault is it that the philosopher was misunderstood. The answer is not so simple as hermeneutics is also not. However, there can be one preventive measure and that is that the philosopher try to be as clear as possible in his communication; there is no genius in abstruseness. Also, the reviewer must be careful to not hurry to critique a philosopher without first having tried to understand his actual belief-system or ground of philosophical activity. Following are two stories of philosophers claiming to have been misunderstood:

M.M. Thomas Vs Sunand Sumithra

Back in the 1980s Sunand Sumithra wrote a doctoral dissertation under the guidance of Professor Peter Beyerhaus at Tubingen, Germany. His dissertation was on the thought of M.M. Thomas (1916-1996), and Indian philosopher and statesman of towering figure. If I remember right, it is said that M.M. Thomas, at one time, sat at a Seminary library, took this book and began marking sentences on it, page after page, and writing in the margin something like "This is not what I meant" or "He has misunderstood me". Leslie Newbigin reviewed Sunand Sumithra and found his doctoral critique of Thomas wanting:

Sumithra's conclusion is that "Thomas's theology, being an attempt to reconcile a philosophy of continuous dynamic evolution, Marxist-Leninist ideology and Hindu spirituality on the one hand, with the biblical revelation on the other, tends ultimately to deprive God of his holiness, Jesus Christ of his lordship and man of his faith, primarily because Thomas neglects the unique character of the Bible".

Readers of Thomas's work who find this conclusion surprising will also be surprised to know that Thomas accepts the impersonal *brahman* of the Vedanta (pp. 132, 301,

334) and denies the lordship of Christ (p. 337), that “his theology makes Christ marginal, almost as an appendage”.... These conclusions are reached by a method sustained throughout the book: short extracts of Thomas’s writings are quoted and then “interpreted.” A few examples will indicate the method. Thus Thomas writes: “When the Christian Church speaks of ‘original sin’ it means that this self-centricity is a fact for all men in all conditions of society, so that self-interest and self-righteousness are perennially present in man’s life.” Sumithra comments: “Thus, for Thomas, Original Sin means universality of sin, not that every single individual is a sinner” (pp. 122f.). Thomas writes: “St. Paul sees in the risen Christ ‘the first fruits’ of the re-creation of humanity, the inauguration of a movement through which Christ establishes his reign over all rule and authority....” Sumithra comments that this shows “the understanding of resurrection as happening in the subjective, spiritual world” (p. 160)....

Why is Sumithra unable to understand Thomas’s thought? It is because he begins from a so called classical view of mission, loosely put together from elements of Ziegenbalg and Carey (pp.1-9) and later amplified as “the redemption of a person from the wrath of God, through his faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ for his sins, so that the sinner is forgiven and joins the Church for further nurture in the spiritual life” (p. 203). Missing from this definition is any reference to the corporate and cosmic dimensions of Christ’s work or to the ethical implications of salvation. ¹

Peter Van Inwagen Vs William Lane Craig

William Lane Craig wrote a response in 2011² to Peter Van Inwagen’s essay “God and Other Uncreated Things”. Peter Van Inwagen’s response to this response was as follows:

I am afraid I must by saying that Craig’s exposition of my views, despite copious-and, I concede, generally well-chosen-quotations, are, well, very far from reliable. But I can hardly demonstrate this, since any paragraph in that exposition I might try to convict of that charge would require five paragraphs or more of discussion for me even to make a start on the project of convincing you that he has misunderstood me. (And, anyway, nothing is more boring than a scholar’s closely reasoned point-by-point defense of the proposition that some other scholar has misrepresented his views.)³

¹Lesslie Newbigin, A Review of “Revolution as Revelation: A Study of M. M. Thomas’s Theology,” by Sunand Sumithra.

² William Craig’s Response to Van Inwagen’s “God and Other Uncreated Things”

³(2015) “A Reply to Craig”, Philosophia Christi 17: 299-305 (full exchange [here](#)).