

## More Mediating, Less Accommodating

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*The Core of Learning: The Philosophical Writings of N. F. S. Grundtvig*, Edward Broadbridge, trans. & ed. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2021, 449,95 kr.

Having already given us translations of Grundtvig's work as an educator, poet, theologian, and politician, here, in this fifth of the six volumes in the series *N. F. S. Grundtvig: Works in English*, Broadbridge presents Grundtvig as a philosopher. He assembles a team of Grundtvig specialists who introduce each Grundtvig essay before the translation. The volume includes both a general introduction by Kim Arne Pedersen and Anders Holm and an insightful afterword by Anders Holm that compares Grundtvig and Kierkegaard. In the original essays, Grundtvig's sentences average 110 words. Broadbridge has done English readers a great service in slicing Grundtvig's Danish down to manageable proportions. Likewise, he has selected texts from over a forty-year period moving from the more to the less polemical Grundtvig of his Grundtvig's later writings, especially in his speeches at Marielyst People's High School. This review will not only summarize highlights of Grundtvig's philosophical thinking but also commend his thinking depicted in this volume as a viable "counter-modern" voice, someone deeply influenced by modernity without being circumscribed by its assumptions when they run counter to faith.

Nine of the fourteen essays presented here stem from Grundtvig's relatively early authorship, from the years 1816-1819, and published in *Danne-Virke*, a journal he founded and edited. These essays include "On Human Beings in the World" (1817), "On Truth, Greatness, and Beauty" (1817), "On Revelation, Art, and Learning" (1817), "On Religion and Liturgy" (1807), "On the Church, the State, and the School, part 2" (1819), "On the Advancement of Learning" (1807), "On the Philosophical Century" (1816), "On Historical Learning, or the Concept of History" (1816), "On the Relation between Learning, Experience, and Sound Common Sense" (1817), "On Proverbs" (1817), and "On the Word and the Mother-Tongue" (1819). However, a few essays from Grundtvig's maturity and

old age are also to be found: “Youth in Our Time” (1850), “History and Naturalism, or the Illumination of Time and Space” (1865), and “Three Speeches at Marielyst People’s High School” from late in his life (1866, 1868, 1871).

In the general introduction, comprising almost 45 pages, Pedersen and Holm demystify the swirl of intellectual currents with which Grundtvig wrestled. With this accessible guide, the reader need not be a specialist in modern philosophy to read Grundtvig’s philosophical writings. The authors explain the social circumstances of Grundtvig’s authorship and the intellectual climate that led him towards developing an alternative to both Rationalism and German Idealism, indebted to the classical Western philosophical heritage though tempered by an appreciation for history, language, and culture.

Likewise, Anders Holm’s afterward analyzing the relation between Grundtvig and Kierkegaard is most welcome. In the English-speaking world, if Danish philosophers are known at all, it is Kierkegaard and not Grundtvig. Holm emphasizes two points where Grundtvig disagrees with Kierkegaard: First, Kierkegaard’s contention that genuine faith requires suffering and, second, his belief that the Christian life is fundamentally unattainable. Holm seeks a complementary approach between the two great thinkers: “Each traced a path through Lutheran Christianity, Grundtvig towards the collective, Kierkegaard towards the individual, the one towards the rewards of joyous faith, the other towards the insights of suffering” (394).

N. F. S. Grundtvig was primarily a pastor, but he was also a historian, poet, theologian, politician, educator, and scholar of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature. He was not a professional philosopher. However, all of the above intellectual endeavors forced him to read contemporary philosophers who jostled for recognition in the wider public, even though he believed that Christianity does not need and can “only exchange blows with” philosophy (184). From an early age, he appropriated the classical proofs for God’s existence, which, in Protestant theology as upheld by orthodox dogmaticians, survived into the era of Rationalism. However, Grundtvig was well-versed in Kant’s epistemology and moral philosophy, as well as the Idealism which developed in the wake of Kant, in the writings of Fichte and Schelling. In 1825, Grundtvig arrived at his “matchless discovery,” that the truth of Christian faith is tied less to inspired scripture

and more to the oral traditions of the church, particularly expounded in the Apostle's Creed. Both before and after this discovery, Grundtvig presented himself as a "simple, believing Christian" (76) and he confessed Christianity as "the truth" (130). But he did not hesitate to lock swords with philosophers who could not affirm Christian teachings at face value or who scoffed at confessing "Christ crucified" (178).

Counter to the modern tendency to center all truth within the knowing subject, eschewing any heteronomous concessions to external authorities, Grundtvig proposes that life and the world make no sense apart from affirming the transcendent reality of God reflected throughout creation as truth, greatness, and beauty. And, counter to German Idealism, he maintains that we must maintain a strict distinction between the uncreated, infinite reality of God and created, finite creatures. Creation relates to the Creator as a "mirror," an icon or image of the divine life. Creation should not only reflect its Creator but also find fulfillment in God. Grundtvig appropriates, but never entirely fleshes out, a Platonism compatible with traditional Christian teachings. Thereby, he refuses to secure a voice for Christian faith bounded by an outlook for which the cosmos is decidedly non-spiritual; instead, as "counter-modern," he out-narrates any secular philosophical alternatives to Christianity.

Grundtvig seeks to relativize philosophy to Christian truth claims and not vice versa. Borrowing the phrase of the contemporary "radically orthodox" Anglican John Milbank, we can say that Grundtvig's philosophy is "more mediating, less accommodating" than is Liberal Protestantism. He is "less accommodating" than thinkers like Kant because the latter "makes room" for faith circumscribed between the knowable, phenomenal world mediated to us by the senses and the unknowable noumenal realm, beyond the senses. Kant's view circumscribes faith within the limits of reason alone. Grundtvig's view, however, is "more mediating" in the sense that he established "learning" as accountable to transcendentals such as truth, greatness, and beauty, and so sought to harmonize the social institutions of the church, the state, and the school.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Jon Taffdrup notes, for Grundtvig, the ultimate outcome of learning is directed towards the beatific vision; it is "an *ongoing endeavour* in this world,

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<sup>1</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Word (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

with its foundation in the Christian belief that full knowledge will only come when we meet our Maker ‘face to face’” (280).

While the Enlightenment works to demystify reality and human nature, Grundtvig, similar to Augustine, proposes that the core of humanity is mystery (69). Philosophy, particularly Schelling’s Idealism (though the same can be said for Hegel), seeks to overcome this mystery with its supposition that reason can make all reality, including human nature, transparent, an attempt to control what at its core is uncontrollable. Although he does not specifically say so, Grundtvig, along with the wider Christian tradition, would affirm the “analogy of being” and so honor a “still greater difference” amid such great similarity between being and beings, or God and the world. For Grundtvig, rationalist epistemologies of all kinds are out of touch with this reality, though empiricism, recognizing the limits of knowledge through the senses, fares better. That said, Grundtvig does not completely disown modern epistemologies. For instance, Fichte’s advancing the “transcendental ego” as the source of all reality, “High German I-ness” (296) as Grundtvig terms it, has a kind of plausibility if we are describing how humans know finite things. But it fails to affirm the dependence of the “I” upon God who sustains the ego and permits it to be.

Clearly, for Grundtvig, faith is no add-on to human nature, but instead is at the core of human nature. He writes, “Philosophising without Faith is the same as looking without eyes; to seek to *grasp* one’s faith is like wanting to tear out one’s eyes in order to *see* them!” (76). Affirming that “human comes first” is done not apart from acknowledging an intractable spiritual dimension to the human. So, it would seem that Grundtvig acknowledges faith first as a generic, common dimension to humanity, while Christian faith, as articulated in the Creed, is a more specific extension of a common faith since it focuses on Christ and his benefits for humanity. At any rate, Grundtvig focuses on transcendentals such as truth, greatness, and beauty, so similar to the traditional transcendentals of truth, beauty, and goodness, which orients his thinking towards a pre-modern, Platonic mindset, a participatory-ontological alternative to the ego-centric orientation of modern thinking post-Descartes.

Similar to Platonism, humans are a “small-scale world (a microcosm)” (80), and even the body is an “image” in which the Spirit reveals itself (80). Likewise, humanity can be aware that it is an “*image* of eternal

Truth" (128). But, similar to Hamann and Herder, Grundtvig modifies his Platonic convictions by defining the temporal as decidedly historical. While all finite things participate not as a part *of* but instead as a part *in* the divine, that is, everything in the world *mirrors* God's thought (176), Grundtvig sees finite reality as historical. He is convinced that this history is not merely accidental, a muddling through time, but instead is directed by the Spirit through the advancement of human learning which will bring world history to its ultimate fulfillment.

The study of history clarifies how God reveals himself by means of the Spirit who shapes the social contours of history (293). History, we could say, is "properly basic": "The world must be understood through *History*, if any philosophy is to come of it" (187). Obviously, though, we find little appreciation for history in Plato. No doubt, Grundtvig appeals to history to relativize the preeminence which the Enlightenment accorded reason, a way to dismiss traditional Christian teachings. Similar to Johann Georg Hamann, Grundtvig counter-proposes that reason is never "pure," abstracted from the senses, language, and culture. Instead, whatever we deem to be real is thoroughly linguistic to the core. As Kim Arne Pedersen notes, "With his [Grundtvig's] belief that the Word (language) constitutes *true* reality, Grundtvig turns the relation between designator and the designated back to front; the created world's reality is due to its *dependence* on language. Language has its roots in the divine Word of Creation" (339). However, unlike Herder, Grundtvig makes it clear that appreciation for historical relativity need not lead to any kind of relativism. Likewise, unlike Spinoza, Grundtvig is no pantheist. Against Spinoza, and Schelling's Idealism, Grundtvig upholds the traditional Christian distinction between the creature and the Creator.

As one who learned the value of critical inquiry from the Enlightenment without buying into its ego-centricism, Grundtvig alters course in his apologetics. Instead of directly defending Christianity through various evidence for its truth, he out-narrates secular alternatives to creedal Christian faith. That is, he shows how Kant's view of the forms of intuition are contradictory or Fichte's anchoring of reality in the transcendental ego is inadequate. But just as important, he demonstrates that his Christian Platonism mediates theology, community life, and academic life better than the Kantians or Idealists or Rationalists. His appreciation for history, unacknowledged by the philosophical competitors, indicates that the social

institutions of the church, the state and the school or the human faculties of imagination, feeling, and thinking need not be in conflict but instead can harmoniously work in tandem for the public good and for personal growth. Indeed, the point of learning was to achieve personal integrity in this life and transfiguration in the life to come.

Grundtvig would not favor the scientism and positivism with their “fact/value” split that so governs the academy and wider public in Europe and North America. His approach to philosophy has not been tried and found wanting. It has yet to be tried! Current positivism, like that of the ancient Sophists spoofed by Plato, is inherently self-contradictory. Far from oppressive, the mimetic participation of social institutions and the individual in the divine life by means of questing for truth, greatness, and beauty offers meaningful teleology so lacking in contemporary Europe and North America. Unlike current secularist worldviews, Grundtvig’s outlook is not only consistent but promises both greater social cohesion and a bid for a hopeful future.

*The Core of Learning* is a worthy representation of a lesser-known side of Grundtvig, who in Denmark ranks alongside Kierkegaard as a philosopher. Now we can judge their merits for ourselves.

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