

The Road to Reason (Book Review)

William T. Dillon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.stjohns.edu/lawreview>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in St. John's Law Review by an authorized editor of St. John's Law Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact selbyc@stjohns.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ROAD TO REASON. By Lecomte du Noüy. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1948. Pp. 256. \$3.50.

It is important for the sake of the record that we here note that this is a posthumous volume. For that same record be it said that it suffers not a whit by reason of that fact. Perhaps this is as it should be, since the volume was edited by the widow of the author. There is a unity and a mechanical perfection about the construction of *The Road to Reason* which is definitely lacking in *Human Destiny*. It is equally pertinent, since we are making comparison, to warn the reader that this volume is no companion to its predecessor.

Dr. Wyckoff, writing the preface, informs us that this book was really written seven years before the better known *Human Destiny*. He also stresses the fact that in those years the author had grown tremendously. Any reader must feel a great sense of loss that this man should be taken thus in the white flowering of his genius—long before the harvest.

The book is by admission of its author a soul search. It is an effort to bring faith and scientific research into an honest and compatible synthesis, a very synchrony, in fact. "In current everyday life," he says, "we are easily satisfied by childish pseudo-explanations. Man does not so much want to understand as to believe he understands. Here again he confuses reason with sentiment, but curiously enough he always prides himself more on his reason, no matter how little he has of it."¹

"It is evident that the meaning of certain expressions such as scientific truth can not be taken literally as the public so often does. There is no 'scientific truth' in the absolute sense."²

He says very definitely that man can not live without a mystical belief. It is his purpose to establish a just liaison. One could wish that he and Erich Frank had collaborated.

Du Noüy points out very forcefully that in all observation, scientific or otherwise, there is a problematic medium, *viz.*, the knowing subject. This leads naturally to a query concerning reality. Apropos of that: "It would be a mistake to think that we always succeed in comprehending a complex phenomenon by dissecting it. We must take the word 'comprehend' in its restricted sense. Indeed, on the one hand the elementary phenomena that we thus reach (gravitation, electrostatic attraction, etc.) still remain very mysterious and only their ubiquity and familiarity give us the impression that we know them."³

¹ P. 36.

² P. 37.

³ P. 48.

This may not seem too important to the philosopher, nor may it appear to be very profound. He may insist that he has always known this and he undoubtedly has, if he has been basic at all. I submit that in spite of his erudition he has nevertheless too often neglected it.

There is a most enlightening disquisition on the problem of interpretation that faces the scientist. In introducing the subject the author offers a delightful paradox. "Our scientific laws are statistical laws; we explain them by the calculus of probabilities which admits a homogeneity based on chaos. On our 'scale of observation' order is born of disorder."⁴

The reader can't help but be impressed by the sincerity of the author and his willingness to admit the embarrassing limitations of science. He is no traitor to his kind or trade but he sees, careful thinker that he is, how many and fecund are the sources of error—how limited the powers of the observer and how ultimately necessary is faith. Philosophers and scientists alike may condemn him but his thinking is courageous and forthright. Whether you may agree with him is not wholly pertinent. Certainly this should be said: there are many things in the volume that are not impeccably orthodox. There may be those who will insist that very little of the writing is so.

There is a most valuable and challenging consideration of hypothesis and its place in scientific achievement. Akin to this is the disquisition on imaginative thinking and its functional achievements. The thesis here developed leads very naturally to the vastly interesting theory about the importance of youthful savants in the scientific milieu.

There are some profoundly striking, and at times disturbing, reflections on "antichance" and teleology. They are so intermingled with the scientific and mathematical data that an unwary student might easily miss them. For this reason, not less than for the truly thoughtful nature of the entire opus, and because the subject itself is innately difficult, the reader must be ready to read slowly and critically.

There is a chapter that is largely moralizing, but of a very high order. It is the only place in which one recognizes the Du Noüy of his preceding work. Incidentally, this one never attains to the vast heights of its predecessor. The author here apologizes for what may appear to be emotionalism. Only the hyper-critic or the hypo-critic could call it that.

There is a striking paragraph that no one should miss. "Unfortunately, certain scientists who profess to scorn philosophy and to despise metaphysics think that they can suppress the objects of metaphysics by showing that these objects—God and the soul amongst others—have no place in this concept. This argument may convince them but it seems less than conclusive to others. For, after all, this system was begotten by them, or, if not by them, by other human minds. It would be surprising indeed if a quantity that had not been introduced into a mathematical construction were contained in it. Nothing can be drawn from a reasoning of this kind, or from a syllogism, that did not already exist in the original equations, in the postulates, or in the premises. It is conceivable that these scientists should have faith in this structural scheme

⁴ P. 59.

or in its future. But to lean on it in order to create a negative metaphysics is simply an error of reasoning. We should not blame them for reasoning falsely when dealing with non-scientific matters, for that is not their field and the result can only harm themselves. But when they abuse the prestige that their purely technical work has given them and attempt to spread these ideas among the young, one is justified in criticizing their anti-scientific spirit and in deploring the fact that their arguments contain elements of passion that no more belong in the embryo of the mathematical scheme they defend than do the convictions they reproach others for having."⁵

This work has or could have a special appeal to lawyers or students in the law if they are of that glad school that is not too happy with the law as it is. Most sciences are inspiredly dissatisfied with things as they are. Their votaries are forever seeking new truth, new techniques, new learning. Not even theology is inimical to this and branches such as mathematics that seem so fixed to many are in reality eagerly alert to grow.

We of the law alone conceive it to be our duty to stand firm in a world of change and growth. Except in erudite volumes that few read we do not even evaluate our system.

The few who are articulately restless must appeal to subterfuge and sometimes to what is dangerously near deceit to build reform within our august sanctuary.

Invariably these innovators are accused of being objectionally radical and in too many cases in the past they have been. The fact is that whether they are or not we, as the super-conservatives of the world, would resent them. Familiarity with the kind of thinking portrayed in the *Road to Reason* may yet prove to be our salvation in jurisprudence.

RIGHT REV. MONSIGNOR WILLIAM T. DILLON.*

THE FEDERAL INCOME TAX, A GUIDE TO THE LAW. By Joyce Stanley and Richard Kilcullen. New York: The Tax Club Press, 1948. Pp. xv, 324, index. \$6.00.

Joyce Stanley and Richard Kilcullen have written what they have called a guide to the law, but they have added an approach which makes the book a most welcome addition to the practitioner's library. They take the Internal Revenue Code as a starting point and discuss each section chronologically, omitting those sections that do not have a general application. The statutory language of the Code is explained in a way that can be understood not only by

⁵ Pp. 233-234.

* President, Saint Joseph's College for Women; Moderator of Catholic Lawyers Guild of the Diocese of Brooklyn.