

The Revolution in Anglo-American Philosophy

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SUMMARY

How the field of philosophy has experienced a Christian renaissance over the last half century.

THE REVOLUTION IN ANGLO-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

“The contemporary Western intellectual world,” declares the noted philosopher Alvin Plantinga, “is a battleground or arena in which rages a battle for men’s souls.” [1] Three schools of thought struggle against each other in the competition to win the minds of thinking men and women: Enlightenment naturalism, post-modern anti-realism, and theism, typically Christian theism. It is in the field of philosophy that the decisive battles are taking place, and the outcome of these contests will reverberate throughout the university and ultimately Western culture. In recent decades the battlelines have dramatically shifted, and I’ve been asked to talk today about some of the changes that have transpired in Anglo-American philosophy over the last generation.

In order to understand where we are today, we need first of all to understand something of where we’ve been. In a recent retrospective, the eminent Princeton philosopher Paul Benacerraf describes what it was like in philosophy at Princeton during the 1950s and ‘60s. The overwhelmingly dominant mode of thinking was scientific naturalism. Physical science was taken to be the final, and really only, arbiter of truth. Metaphysics—that traditional branch of philosophy which deals with questions about reality which are beyond science—metaphysics had been vanquished, expelled from philosophy like an unclean leper. “The philosophy of science,” says Benacerraf, “was the queen of all the branches” of philosophy, since “it had the tools. . . to address all the problems.” [2] Any problem that could not be addressed by science was simply dismissed as a pseudo-problem. If a question didn’t have a scientific answer, then it wasn’t a real question—just a pseudo-question masquerading as a real question. Indeed, part of the task of philosophy was to clean up the discipline from the mess that earlier generations had made of it by endlessly struggling with such pseudo-questions. There was thus a certain self-conscious, crusading zeal with which philosophers carried out their task. The reformers, says, Benacerraf, “trumpeted the militant affirmation of the new faith. . . , in which the fumbling confusions of our forerunners were to be replaced by the emerging science of philosophy. This new enlightenment would put the old metaphysical views and attitudes to rest and replace them with the new mode of doing philosophy.”

The book *Language, Truth, and Logic* by the British philosopher A. J. Ayer served as a sort of manifesto for this movement. As Benacerraf puts it, it was “not a great book,” but it was “a wonderful exponent of the spirit of the time.” The principal weapon employed by Ayer in his campaign against metaphysics was the vaunted Verification Principle of Meaning. According to that Principle, which went through a number of revisions, a sentence in order to be meaningful must be capable in principle of being empirically verified. Since metaphysical statements were

beyond the reach of empirical science, they could not be verified and were therefore dismissed as meaningless combinations of words.

Ayer was very explicit about the theological implications of this Verificationism. [3] Since God is a metaphysical object, Ayer says, the possibility of religious knowledge is “ruled out by our treatment of metaphysics.” Thus, there can be no knowledge of God.

Now someone might say that we can offer evidence of God’s existence. But Ayer will have none of it. If by the word “God” you mean a transcendent being, says Ayer, then the word “God” is a metaphysical term, and so “it cannot be even probable that a god exists.” He explains, “To say that ‘God exists’ is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance.”

Suppose some Christian says, “But I know God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You can’t deny my personal experience!” Ayer is not impressed. He wouldn’t think to deny that you have an experience, he says, any more than he would deny that someone has an experience of, say, seeing a yellow object. But, he says, “whereas the sentence ‘There exists here a yellow-coloured material thing’ expresses a genuine proposition which could be empirically verified, the sentence ‘There exists a transcendent god’ has . . . no literal significance” because it’s not verifiable. Thus the appeal to religious experience, says Ayer, is “altogether fallacious.”

I hope you grasp the significance of this view. On this perspective statements about God do not even have the dignity of being false. They’re just meaningless words or sounds uttered in the air. If you say to someone, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” you’ve said nothing more meaningful than if you had proclaimed, “T’was brillig; and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe.”

And it wasn’t just metaphysical statements that were regarded as meaningless. Ethical statements—statements about right and wrong, good and evil—were also declared to be meaningless. Why? Because they can’t be empirically verified! Such statements are simply emotional expressions of the user’s feelings. Ayer says, “if I say ‘Stealing money is wrong’ I produce a statement which has no factual meaning. . . . It is as if I had written, ‘Stealing money!!’ . . . It is clear that there is nothing said here which can be true or false.” So he concludes that value judgments “have no objective validity whatsoever.” The same goes for aesthetic statements concerning beauty and ugliness. According to Ayer, “Such aesthetic words as ‘beautiful’ and ‘hideous’ are employed. . . , not to make statements of fact, but simply to express certain feelings. . . .”

It’s sobering that it was this sort of thinking that dominated the departments of philosophy at American universities during the last century into the 1960s. It was not without its impact on American religious life. Under the pressure of Verificationism, some theologians began to advocate

emotivist theories of theological language. On their view theological statements are not statements of fact at all but merely express the user's emotions and attitudes. For example, the sentence "God created the world" doesn't purport to make any factual statement at all but merely is a way of expressing, say, one's awe and wonder at the grandeur of the universe. The low point undoubtedly came with the so-called Death of God theology of the mid-1960s, the only theological school of thought, by the way, which has ever originated on American soil. On April 8, 1966, in a dramatic red on black cover *Time* magazine asked "Is God Dead?" And the article described the movement then current among American theologians to proclaim the death of God.

Today that movement has all but disappeared. What happened? Well, what happened is a remarkable story.

Philosophers exposed an incoherence which lay at the very heart of the prevailing philosophy of scientific naturalism. They began to realize that the Verification Principle would not only force us to dismiss theological statements as meaningless, but also a great many scientific statements, so that the Principle undermined the sacred cow of science at whose altar they knelt. Contemporary physics is filled with metaphysical statements that cannot be empirically verified. As the eminent philosopher of science Bas van Fraassen nicely puts it: "Do the concepts of the Trinity [and] the soul...baffle you? They pale beside the unimaginable otherness of closed space-times, event-horizons, EPR correlations, and bootstrap models" [4] If the ship of scientific naturalism was not to be scuttled, Verificationism had to be cut loose. But there was a price to be paid for abandoning the Verification Principle. Since Verificationism had been the principal means of barring the door to metaphysics, the jettisoning of Verificationism meant that there was no longer anyone at the door to prevent this dreaded and unwelcome visitor from making a reappearance.

But even more fundamentally, it was also realized that the Verification Principle is self-refuting. Simply ask yourself, is the sentence "A meaningful sentence must be capable in principle of being empirically verified" *itself* capable of being empirically verified? Obviously not; no amount of empirical evidence would serve to verify its truth. The Verification Principle is therefore by its own criterion a meaningless combination of words, which need hardly detain us, or at best an arbitrary definition, which we are at liberty to reject. Therefore, the Verification Principle and the theory of meaning it supported has been almost universally abandoned by philosophers.

Undoubtedly, the most important philosophical event of the twentieth century was the collapse of the Verificationism that lay at the heart of scientific naturalism. One result has been the rise of Post-Modernism. Scientific naturalism, originating in the Enlightenment, is lumped in with so-called "Modernity," or the modern age, which is dominated by science and technology. The collapse of Verificationism brought with it a sort of disillusionment with the whole Enlightenment project of scientific naturalism.

This might seem at first blush a welcome development for Christian believers, weary of attacks by Enlightenment naturalists. But in this case the cure is worse than the disease. For Post-Modernists

have tended to despair of ever finding objective truth and knowledge. After all, if science, man's greatest intellectual achievement, cannot do so, then what hope is there? Hence, Post-modernists have tended to deny that there are universal standards of logic, rationality, and truth. This claim is obviously incompatible with the Christian idea of God, who, as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is an objectively existing reality, and who, as an omniscient being, has a privileged perspective on the world, grasping the world as it is in the unity of his intellect. There is thus a unity and objectivity to truth which is incompatible with Post-Modernism. Post-Modernism is therefore no more friendly to Christian truth claims than is Enlightenment naturalism. Christianity is reduced to but one voice in a cacophony of competing claims, none of which is objectively true.

In any case, Enlightenment naturalism is so deeply imbedded in Western intellectual life that anti-rationalistic currents like Romanticism and Post-Modernism are doomed, I think, to be mere passing fashions. After all, nobody adopts a Post-Modernist view of literary texts when reading the labels on a medicine bottle or a box of rat poison! Clearly, we ignore the objective meaning of such texts only at peril to our lives. In the end, people turn out to be subjectivists only about ethics and religion, not about matters provable by science. But that's not Post-Modernism; this is nothing else than classic Enlightenment naturalism—it's the old Modernism in a fashionable new guise. I can't help but suspect that Post-Modernism is Satan's most recent crafty deception: pretending to be dead and gone, Verificationism reappears in fancy new masquerade, but underneath the fancy dress it's the same, old subjectivism and relativism that were characteristic of Modernity. Post-Modernism is a sham.

Fortunately, Post-Modernism is not the only result of the collapse of Verificationism. Indeed, in philosophy Post-Modernism is really a rather marginal movement, being ensconced principally in departments of English, literature, and education, rather than in philosophy. In philosophy the demise of Verificationism has instead been accompanied by a resurgence of metaphysics, along with all the other traditional questions of philosophy which had been suppressed by the verificationists. Along with this resurgence has come something new and altogether unanticipated: the birth of a new discipline, Philosophy of Religion, and a renaissance in Christian philosophy.

Since the late 1960s Christian philosophers have been coming out of the closet and defending the truth of the Christian worldview with philosophically sophisticated arguments in the finest scholarly journals and professional societies. At the same time that theologians were writing God's obituary, a new generation of philosophers was re-discovering His vitality. And the face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed as a result. Just a few years after its death of God issue, *Time* ran a similar red on black cover story, only this time the question read, "Is God Coming Back to Life?" That's how it must have seemed to those theological morticians of the 1960s! During the 1970s interest in philosophy of religion continued to grow, and in 1980 *Time* found itself running another major story entitled "Modernizing the Case for God" in which it described the movement among contemporary philosophers to refurbish the traditional arguments for God's existence. *Time* marveled,

In a quiet revolution in thought and argument that hardly anybody could have foreseen only two

decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers, but in the crisp intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse. [5]

According to the article, the noted American philosopher Roderick Chisholm believes that the reason that atheism was so influential a generation ago is that the brightest philosophers were atheists; but, he says, today many of the brightest philosophers are theists, and they are using a tough-minded intellectualism in defense of that belief that was formerly lacking on their side of the debate.

Today Philosophy of Religion flourishes in young journals such as the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Religious Studies*, *Sophia*, *Faith and Philosophy*, *Philosophia Christi*, *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, and other journals devoted to the discipline, not to mention the standard non-specialist journals. Professional societies such as the Society of Christian Philosophers, the Evangelical Philosophical Society, the American Catholic Philosophical Society, not to mention other smaller groups, number thousands of members. Publishing in Philosophy of Religion is booming, as is evident from the abundance of available textbooks (also testimony to the seemingly insatiable interest among students for courses on the subject) such as Rowe and Wainwright's *Philosophy of Religion* (1989), Stewart's *Philosophy of Religion* (1996), Basinger, *et al.*'s *Philosophy of Religion* (1996), Pojman's *Philosophy of Religion* (1998), Murray and Stump's *Philosophy of Religion* (1998), and Clark's *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (2000).

I was invited by Edinburgh University Press to edit a volume of readings in Philosophy of Religion for them, and so I put together a collection of very pro-Christian readings on various topics in the field. To my surprise, Rutgers University Press wanted to be the American co-publisher of the book. When I later said to the Rutgers editor, "I'm frankly surprised that you were interested in doing the book. I mean, it's very Christian," he replied, "I know; that's exactly why we wanted it." There's money in publishing Christian books. Did you know that Oxford University Press is now publishing popular-level books on Christian apologetics? Last year John Stackhouse's book *Humble Apologetics* appeared with OUP, and my debate with Dartmouth philosophy professor Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, was released by OUP as *God: A Debate between a Christian and an Atheist*.

To give you some feel for the impact of this revolution in Anglo-American philosophy, I want to quote at some length from an article by Quentin Smith which appeared in the fall of 2001 in the secularist journal *Philo* lamenting what Smith called "the desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the late 1960s." Smith, himself a prominent atheist philosopher, writes,

By the second half of the twentieth century, universities . . . had been become in the main secularized. The standard . . . position in each field . . . assumed or involved arguments for a naturalist world-view; departments of theology or religion aimed to understand the meaning and origins of religious writings, not to develop arguments against naturalism. Analytic philosophers . . . treated theism as an anti-realist or non-cognitivist world-view, requiring the reality, not of a deity, but merely of emotive expressions or certain "forms of life". . . .

This is not to say that none of the scholars in the various academic fields were [*sic*] realist theists in their "private lives"; but realist theists, for the most part, excluded their theism from their

publications and teaching, in large part because theism . . . was mainly considered to have such a low epistemic status that it did not meet the standards of an “academically respectable” position to hold. The secularization of mainstream academia began to quickly unravel upon the publication of Plantinga’s influential book, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967. It became apparent to the philosophical profession that this book displayed that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original world-view. This book, followed seven years later by Plantinga’s even more impressive book, *The Nature of Necessity*, made it manifest that a realist theist was writing at the highest qualitative level of analytic philosophy, on the same playing field as Carnap, Russell, Moore, Grønbaun, and other naturalists. . . .

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga’s writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians. Although many theists do not work in the area of the philosophy of religion, so many of them do work in this area that there are now over five philosophy journals devoted to theism or the philosophy of religion, such as *Faith and Philosophy*, *Religious Studies*, *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, *Sophia*, *Philosophia Christi*, etc. *Philosophia Christi* began in the late 1990s and already is overflowing with submissions from leading philosophers.

. . . theists in other fields tend to compartmentalize their theistic beliefs from their scholarly work; they rarely assume and never argue for theism in their scholarly work. If they did, they would be committing academic suicide or, more exactly, their articles would quickly be rejected. . . . But in philosophy, it became, almost overnight, “academically respectable” to argue for theism, making philosophy a favored field of entry for the most intelligent and talented theists entering academia today. A count would show that in Oxford University Press’ 2000-2001 catalogue, there are 96 recently published books on the philosophy of religion By contrast, there are 28 books . . . on the philosophy of language, 23 on epistemology (including religious epistemology, such as Plantinga’s *Warranted Christian Belief*), 14 on metaphysics, [etc]. . . .

Smith concludes,

God is not “dead” in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments. [6]

This is the testimony of a prominent atheist philosopher to the change that has taken place before his eyes in Anglo-American philosophy. Now I think he’s probably exaggerating when he estimates that one-quarter to one-third of American philosophers are theists; but what his estimates do reveal is the *perceived impact* of Christian philosophers upon this field. Like Gideon’s army, a committed minority of activists can have an impact far out of proportion to their numbers. The principal error that Smith makes is calling philosophy departments God’s “last stronghold” at the university. On the contrary, philosophy departments are a beachhead, from which operations can be launched to impact other disciplines at the university for Christ.

Since philosophy is foundational to every discipline of the university, philosophy is the most strategic discipline to be influenced for Christ. Whether it be Philosophy of Science, Philosophy of Education, Philosophy of Law, Philosophy of Mathematics, or what have you, every discipline will have an associated field of philosophy foundational to that discipline. The philosophy of these

respective disciplines is not theologically neutral. Adoption of presuppositions consonant with or inimical to orthodox Christian theism will have a significant leavening effect throughout that discipline which will, in turn, dispose its practitioners for or against the Christian faith. Christian philosophers, by influencing the philosophy of these various disciplines, help to shape the thinking of the entire university in such a way as to dispose our future generations of leaders to the reception of the Gospel.

Indeed, I think we are already seeing the spillover effect in areas like the natural sciences, where a flourishing dialogue between science and religion is going on, and proponents of so-called “Intelligent Design” are making waves. Many of the key players in the Intelligent Design movement are not scientists but philosophers, people like William Dembski, Steve Meyer, Paul Nelson, and so on. I’m optimistic that the revolution begun in Christian philosophy will like leaven eventually extend its influence throughout the university.

Why is this important? Simply because the single most important institution shaping Western culture is the university. It is at the university that our future political leaders, our journalists, our teachers, our business executives, our lawyers, our artists, will be trained. It is at the university that they will formulate or, more likely, simply absorb the worldview that will shape their lives. And since these are the opinion-makers and leaders who shape our culture, the worldview that they imbibe at the university will be the one that shapes our culture. If the Christian worldview can be restored to a place of prominence and respect at the university, it will have a leavening effect throughout society. If we change the university, we change our culture through those who shape culture.

Why is this important? Simply because the Gospel is never heard in isolation. It is always heard against the background of the cultural milieu in which one lives. A person raised in a cultural milieu in which Christianity is still seen as an intellectually viable option will display an openness to the Gospel which a person who is secularized will not. One may as well tell a secular person to believe in fairies or leprechauns as in Jesus Christ! Or, to give a more realistic illustration, it is like our being approached on the street by a devotee of the Hare Krishna movement, who invites us to believe in Krishna. Such an invitation strikes us as bizarre, freakish, perhaps even amusing. But to a person on the streets of Bombay, such an invitation would, one expects, appear quite reasonable and be serious cause for reflection. Do evangelicals appear any less weird to persons on the streets of Bonn, London, or New York than do the devotees of Krishna? In a culture shaped by a secular worldview inculcated at the university the Gospel will no longer be heard as a live option by most adults. Change the university and you will change culture through those who shape culture. Who, then, are the persons who are positioned most effectively to bring about Christian change at the university? In a word: Christian faculty. It is part of the task of Christian academics to help create and sustain a cultural milieu in which the Gospel can be heard as an intellectually viable option for thinking men and women. What is sad, however, is how ill-equipped many Christian faculty are to meet this great challenge that confronts them. Let me mention three areas in which they need encouragement and training.

1. Many Christian faculty need to be encouraged to engage intellectually, not just with their chosen discipline, but with their Christian faith. It may seem strange to have to encourage Christian academics to do this. You’d think that as persons who have chosen the life of the mind as their vocation, they would be naturally intellectually curious and so desirous of understanding and

exploring Christian theology and apologetics. But I have found that this is not at all the case. I am astonished at what a weak grasp many Christian professors seem to have of Christian doctrine and how impotent they are when called upon to give a defense for the hope that is in them. It's shocking to me to discover how many Christian academics seem content to possess a profound knowledge of their area of specialization and yet have little better than a Sunday School education when it comes to their Christian faith, on which they have staked their lives and eternal destiny. I've been stunned by conversations with Christian professors which reveal that they have little grasp of basic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, or the attributes of God. It also surprises me when I see their loss for words when called upon to explain why they believe that Christianity is true. Though brilliant in their chosen fields, they are like uninformed laymen when it comes to their Christian faith. We need to help them to come to a deeper understanding of Bible doctrine, church history, theology, and apologetics.

2. We need to encourage Christian faculty to integrate their Christian faith with their discipline. All truth is God's truth, so no area of study lies outside the domain of God's truth. Somehow it is all integrated into the whole which is perfectly known by God alone. The goal of the Christian academic should be to discover how his field of study fits into the whole scheme of God's truth. What that implies is that Christian faculty must be encouraged to think Christianly about their respective areas of specialization. Here it is absolutely crucial to realize that the presuppositions which underlie one's chosen discipline will have been very largely shaped by secular, naturalistic worldviews. Therefore, we need to challenge Christian faculty to be prepared to re-think one's whole discipline from the ground up in line with Christian presuppositions.

I've been scandalized by the lack of integrative thinking on the part of Christian colleagues. For example, I spoke at length with a Christian professor of literature at one of our state universities in the US who told me that she believed that texts have no meaning. Rather meaning exists only in the mind of the reader. I was astonished that an intelligent Christian could have bought into the relativistic, post-modern view of meaning that is rampant in departments of English and Literature. I asked her what her view implied for the Bible. As a text does it have no meaning? Is anyone free to give whatever meaning he wants to the biblical text? Is it legitimate to take the meaning of the Bible to be that God is hate and will send everyone to hell who believes in Christ? Could the meaning of the Bible be a pay-by-play account of the 2002 World Cup final? She said she exempted the Bible from having no objective meaning because it alone is inspired by God. But I pointed out to her that this move was entirely *ad hoc*; on the level of text it is just like any other text, regardless of who its author was, and therefore should be objectively meaningless. Thank God that she was enough of a Christian to realize that that conclusion was theologically unacceptable! She was clearly shaken by our conversation. "I'm going to have to re-think everything," she said. "You see, I've been on the board of a public library which was faced with the issue of whether to ban pornographic materials from being available in the library. I argued that since texts have no meaning in themselves and meaning is only in the mind of the reader, nothing is inherently pornographic and that therefore the library should make such materials available. If you're right, then I've made a terrible mistake." To think that a Christian academic, infected by Post-Modernism and insufficiently reflective from a Christian point of view, should have thus been responsible for putting pornography in the hands of children and maybe even predators, brought home to me as

never before the importance of urging Christian academics to develop a Christian world and life view even if that means re-thinking the very foundations of one's discipline and reforming them in line with Christian truth.

3. We need to help Christian faculty in their own personal, spiritual formation. The academic life is inherently an agonistic life. That is to say, it is combative, involving a struggle of ideas. It tends to promote selfish ambition, arrogance, and competitiveness. I recall the remark of one scientist that science is a field where egotistical motivations and the advance of the discipline happen fortunately to coincide. But this is not the kind of wisdom which God treasures. On the contrary He calls it demonic. Look at James 3.13-15: "Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish." Notice the progression: "earthly, unspiritual, devilish." This sort of worldly, demonic wisdom is personally destructive, both to oneself and to others. I recall meeting a scientist in Germany who was divorced from his wife and longed to visit his little son. He told us that early on in his career all he could think about was his research, and he invested the best part of his energy and time in pursuing his career. It led to the destruction of his marriage and the loss of his family. "I was a fool!" he told us.

In general, we need to call Christian academics to the same holiness of life that all disciples of Christ are called to. It is vitally important that we help them to see that, as public representatives of Christ, each of them needs to be a person who goes often to his knees to spend time with God, who depends daily on the filling of the Holy Spirit to live a life pleasing and acceptable to God, who shares his faith in Christ boldly and without apology to fellow faculty and students.

It is sad, but true, that many Christian faculty have never shared their faith in Christ in a university setting. We need to train them in how to share the Gospel with another person, how to lead that person to a saving knowledge of Christ, and how to disciple that individual further in the Christian life.

May God help us as we seek to influence the university for Christ with all the reverberations that will bring to American society!

Footnotes

[1] Alvin Plantinga, "The Twin Pillars of Christian Scholarship," Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin College and Seminary, 1990.

[2] Paul Benacerraf, "What Mathematical Truth Could Not Be--I," in *Benacerraf and His Critics*, ed. Adam Morton and Stephen P. Stich (Oxford: Blackwell: 1996), p. 18.

[3] A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), Chapter VI: "Critique of Ethics and Theology."

[4] Bas van Fraassen in *Images of Science*, ed. by P. Churchland and C. Hooker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 258.

[5] "Modernizing the Case for God," *Time* (7 April 1980), pp. 65-66.

[6] Quentin Smith, "The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism" *Philo* 4/2(2001): 3-4.