

How I Arrived
At This Conclusion

Introduction

If I have succeeded in persuading my reader of any truth, it must be this above all: that reason is personal in its determinations, from whatever common fund of intellect that it may have borrowed its subject matter.

Charles Renouvier, *How I Arrived at This Conclusion*¹

Some years ago, while looking over J. Alexander Gunn's admirable study of the development of French philosophy, I was struck by the amount of space the author had devoted to the work of Charles Renouvier and the high praise he had for him as a man and a philosopher. "Possessed of one of the most powerful minds of the 19th century," Gunn writes, "Renouvier and Auguste Comte share the highest honors in French philosophy during that century."² My interest aroused, I read rapidly through the parts of the book dealing with Renouvier's writings in such diverse areas as philosophy, science, freedom, progress, ethics and religion. It was in the course of this reading that I came across mention of Renouvier's philosophical memoir, entitled *How I Arrived at This Conclusion*. I eventually decided to translate this memoir, which Renouvier regarded as the first of its kind, and offer it for publication as the first of Renouvier's works to be translated into English.

Charles Renouvier is virtually unknown today in this country. There is evidence that the situation is no different in France, the country of his birth. This is not the place for a thorough examination of why this is the case,³ but I shall attempt to suggest some of the reasons before moving on to the historical circumstances in which Renouvier's memoir made its appearance. Finally, something will be said regarding Renouvier's relevance for today.

Having given up his opportunity for a career of public service after graduating from the *École polytechnique*, Renouvier relates, he was prevailed upon by an acquaintance to read Descartes' *Principles*. Thrilled by the experience, he was seized by a passion for philosophy and rapidly read the rest of Descartes's writings and then those of Spinoza, Leibniz and Malebranche, as well as a number of other works. As did Rousseau almost a century before, Renouvier entered a competition held under the auspices of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*. The theme was Cartesianism; his paper won him an honorable mention. In the report on the competitive examination, however, along with the announcement of his honorable mention the belief was expressed that the paper had been written by a foreigner.

Here then, early on, was an indication of a potential barrier to wider dissemination of his work. For, whatever virtues it may have—among them in my view depth, directness, thoroughness and clarity, —his writing has never been described as felicitous in style. And in France, style mattered and still does among the educated. In his authoritative study of French literature since 1795, Albert Thibaudet puts it as follows: "Unfortunately, his abstract prickling style, like pieces of broken bottles, much harder even than Comte's, has restricted his influence to a domain of which the professional philosophers alone possess the keys."⁴ And save for the period following the establishment of the Third French Republic in 1870, when the influence of Renouvier's philosophy among the professors of the University was greatest, the academic establishment has been far from hospitable. Of no small importance in the long run for the cultivation of interest in his work is the fact that his contributions to philosophy were not incorporated into the

curriculum of the schools despite the growth of his reputation and influence during the 1870s, '80s and '90s. Regarded as an outsider, Renouvier was excluded from Victor Cousin's "regiment," which was made up of philosophers with views similar to those of the master, who appointed them to important teaching posts within the University of Paris. Not bound, therefore, in any way to the University, he was able to distance himself from those who supported and advanced the "official doctrine." And he criticized them as well, as witness the unflattering reference to the Eclectics in his memoir.

Funded by a wealthy and sympathetic family, Renouvier was free, after a brief period of active political life during the upheaval of 1848, to devote himself to his enormous intellectual labors. It was during that decisive time, from the establishment of the Second Empire until its fall that his mature philosophy emerged, embodied in the *Essais de critique generale* and *Science de la morale*.

As Renouvier tells us, he was an ardent follower of the Saint-Simonians as early as the age of 17. This folly, as he describes it, which involved the conviction that a perfect society was about to be achieved lost its hold on him by his twentieth year. Only gradually did an old tendency within him to regard belief as central in the sequence of acts by which any man binds himself to a doctrine, mature into the conviction that free beliefs held without constraint, are the only moral ones, that truth is a privileged possession of no one, that they are usurpers who mean to shape humanity according to plans for which they claim whatever revelation or appropriate knowledge, and that finally, societies must not act concerning themselves or their members except in defense of the law, and only in conformity with the spirit of moral self—government.⁵

In time, Renouvier became profoundly skeptical and sharply critical of all claims made in the name of one ideology or another to knowledge of the future course of history. The idea of necessary progress was his particular *bête noire*. Hence his rejection of the ideas of history in Comtism and in Marxism, as well as in the forms of determinism (Spencerism for one) inspired by Darwinian evolution. In an age more and more in thrall to these doctrines,

Renouvier's defense of liberty, powerfully supported by his mature philosophy, whose growth he traces in this memoir, stood as a beacon. And at this distance in time, his strong concern and forebodings regarding the growing threat of these ideologies takes on something of the nature of prophecy. Nor did his vocal opposition to determinism in any form commend him or his philosophy to its adherents, growing in numbers and in influence. But it was the powerful impetus given by the First World War to the establishment of totalitarian regimes, which drew sustenance from these doctrines, that tended even more to push Renouvier and his work to the sidelines. Nor did the rise of Marxism in post—World War II France and the preference of French philosophers like Jean—Paul Sartre for German philosophers like Husserl and Heidegger do anything to change the situation.

Just as the launching of Sputnik in 1957 was interpreted in this country as a national defeat, in particular a defeat for American education, so the Prussian victory over France in 1870 was considered a defeat for the French way of life as well as for French schools.⁶ Many believed, Renouvier among them, that not only was a national renaissance necessary but that it could only happen if France escaped from its Catholic past. For Renouvier as for so many other republican reformers, Catholicism gave powerful support to authoritarian government and treated morality in an authoritarian manner (which Renouvier regarded as no morality at all).

In 1872, with his friend and colleague François Pillon, Renouvier began publication of *La critique philosophique*, which he intended to use to help effect this rebirth. We may characterize the effort as embodying an idea of education, going back to Greek thought and practice, that involves making the good state by educating an elite to knowledge of the good. The Third Republic was welcomed by Renouvier as the form of government best suited for the effectuation of this idea. And the new journal, which was intended to cast a wide net,⁷ was to provide the means of making his philosophy the philosophy of the Third Republic. The following quotation from the prospectus of this journal reveals that

Renouvier was convinced that his mature philosophy provided the necessary philosophical foundation: “*La critique philosophique* is the voice of a great doctrine born of the spirit of the eighteenth century and of the French Revolution, whose principles have been laid down by Kant and which is now presented, freed of the contradictions and errors that obscured it in the beginning, and that had stood in the way of its progress, and is revived by a new analysis of the laws of thought and of cognition that has given it what it had not gotten from Kant, a truly positive character and a complete and harmonious systematic unity.”⁸ Thus, Renouvier indicated his debt to Kant and distanced himself from him at the same time.

But Renouvier never considered his the only true philosophy to the exclusion of all the others. This he makes abundantly clear in the remarkable introduction to his memoir. There, he strongly emphasizes that no matter what any philosophical system claims, it remains the personal work of a particular thinker. The fundamental truth is that regardless of the sources of the subject matter, reason is ultimately personal in its determinations. Therefore, the system is no better than the thinker whose ideas inform it. Renouvier states that he is ready to tell the reader how he came to hold his own views, knowing full well that disagreement remains the fundamental state in which philosophers find themselves. And it is in this spirit that he defends and justifies his choices.

In 1889, in an important article published in *La critique philosophique*, Renouvier took leave of this journal.⁹ Deeply pessimistic and full of forebodings, he admitted that his effort to persuade a new generation of young minds to join his philosophic movement had failed. Inspired by the example of Darwinian evolution, he writes, new ideologies claiming to have found the laws of social development were contributing to a destructive moral relativism and a hedonism which he was certain masked a deep pessimism. He deplored the unfounded optimism of the evolutionists who envisaged the coming of an age of unlimited progress. And in a passage suggesting comparison with the claims sometimes made by scientists today, he bitterly criticized those of his own day who proclaimed that they were about to achieve a total scientific synthesis

of all phenomena (something he considered unattainable). In a prophetic vein, he called attention to the failure of socialism to prevent militarism, and indicated his fear that the vast proliferation of modern weapons made possible by industrialization promised a war with destruction on an enormous scale.

In looking back to 1872, it is indeed possible to argue that Renouvier underestimated the difficulties involved in the accomplishment of his goal. A situation that had seemed in 1872 to be so full of promise seemed by 1889 to have entirely evaded his ability to shape it. Yet one cannot believe that he was entirely without hope, since he had expressed the belief only three years before that an alliance between men of reason and men of religion, between criticism and Christianity, based upon mutual respect and a shared belief in a moral world might be possible.¹⁰ He had a vision of an alliance involving a changed Roman Catholic Church that would be willing, in a pluralistic society, to accept disagreement with those with whom it otherwise shared so many common concerns. But this hope was to bear fruit in France only gradually, in the course of the twentieth century, after the realization of the Separation Law of 1905, the detachment of the Church from the old parties of the Right and the growth of a sense by the public that the Church no longer sought temporal power and the restoration of its ancient privileges. Many of the dangers to which Renouvier called attention are now fully upon us. The future of democracy may very well depend upon the way in which we deal with disagreement. Facing an uncertain future with new dangers from radical religious ideologies, following a century so full of ideological excesses and the horrors they helped to bring about, Renouvier strikes one as a man who set an example in his life and in his work from which men and women of intellect can still learn.

Note on the Text

The reader will find that in his own note on the text, Renouvier relates that he added his philosophical memoir as a supplement

to his two-volume *Esquisse d'une classification systématique des doctrines philosophiques*. The memoir, *Comment je suis arrivé à cette conclusion*, never has appeared by itself in book form, but a Spanish translation of the entire *Esquisse* was published in Buenos Aires in 1948. The present translation of the memoir is the first to appear in English.

In this edition, I have attempted to stay as close to Renouvier's meaning and style as English usage would permit. The few typographical errors have been corrected without comment, and a number of Renouvier's lengthy sentences have been divided where it has been possible to do so without changing his meaning. Where the style and language have made it virtually inaccessible to the average reader a decision was made, without changing the content, to translate by ideas rather than literally. As an aid to the reader in following the course of Renouvier's complex philosophical development, I have added chapter heads. I have also eliminated Renouvier's rather extensive use of italics for emphasis.

Renouvier's own notes have been left unchanged; each is marked by an asterisk. My additional notes follow the introduction and the text. I have provided a glossary that is restricted to meanings that aid in understanding words or expressions as they are used in this particular work. Renouvier's own index has been used as the basis for the one the reader will find in this book.

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