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THE NATURE OF TRUTH

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Although there seems to be little use in speculating about the degree of Pilate's philosophic profundity when he asked, "What is truth?" a Christian does well to consider Christ's prior statement, "I am the truth," together with other Scriptural passages that might throw light on the nature of truth. Since Protestants, in contradistinction to Romanists, reject a literalism in the words, "This is my body," and since other phrases of Christ, e.g. "I am the door," are obviously figurative, one must not immediately assume that "I am the truth," is true literally or that the nature of truth is 'personal' and therefore non-propositional and non-logical. At least other views should be considered; and here three theories will be briefly examined.

The first of these three views, for want of a better name, will be called the empirical view of truth. That the view to be described is empirical, no one can deny; though there may be empiricists who would not accept all the description. Whether it is possible to have a consistent empiricism without one or another of these elements, everyone must consider for himself.

This empiricism professes to discover truth in sensory experience. The two ideas to be noted are discovery and experience. Truth is said to be discovered or given, not constructed or reconstructed with the aid of a priori forms of the mind. Reliance is placed on sense data. The idea of a tree is a sense datum, not the work of the productive imagination, and so is a cloud and a mountain. Thus things are found in or by sensation alone. This view does not necessarily entail Locke's analysis of experience into the simple ideas of white, bitter, soft, and so on; but even if the data are wholes after the manner of Gestalt psychology, it is essential that they be given in their entirety, in a single experience of receptivity, and that truth consists of these perceptions with their legitimate combinations.

The Christian proponents of this empiricism see in it at least three advantages. First, it conforms to common sense. No uneducated person would ever suspect that his image or idea of a tree or a mountain is other than a sense datum. To ordinary consciousness there seems to be no intellectual operation involved. Second, a Christian in particular can easily believe that this view is extremely favorable to, not to say necessary for, a proper use of Christian evidences. Do not the arguments from miracles, fulfilled prophecy, and especially from the resurrection of Christ demand an empirical epistemology? And third, since the history of philosophy furnishes examples of views which imply omniscience to avoid skepticism and skepticism to avoid omniscience, empiricism appears to steer precisely between this Scylla and Charybdis.

However, as epistemological problems are extremely complex, so that an assured adherence to a detailed view borders on rashness, it is not surprising that empiricism has had to face serious difficulties. The history of British empiricism from Locke to Hume is *prima facie* evidence of its skeptical implications. Nor does the connection between empiricism and skepticism depend on Locke's enumeration of simple ideas. Not only have the later and more radical empiricisms of James, Schiller, and Dewey tended toward skepticism, but even Hume himself made little use of Locke's analysis. A second difficulty, though perhaps not so evident a one, concerns the existence of sense data. With all of Kant's efforts to avoid the skepticism of Hume he still insisted on a sensory given, and the development from Kant to Hegel contained as one of its most important phases a search for this given. The search was unsuccessful. A contemporary Hegelian, Brand Blanshard, in his *The Nature of Thought*, is still troubled by the same difficulty. And if it be supposed that this is not the lesson a Christian should take from Hegelianism, it might be recalled that St. Augustine also was unable to find a sensory given existing apart from an intellectual operation.

These two difficulties concern the function of the human mind in its obtaining truth, and may therefore be called subjective. One should also distinguish certain objective considerations, for the two questions, What is truth? and How do we know?, although related, are not identical. Further use of this distinction will be made later; so far as empiricism goes, the objective difficulty reduces to the question whether the unity of truth can be preserved or whether data, precisely because they are data, must be disconnected and unsystematic. A mere mention of this objective difficulty must suffice at this point in view of the contention that the subjective difficulties with empiricism seem to be insuperable.

If some empiricists, whatever they think of the objections, refuse to accept all the elements of the description above, a second theory of truth, or group of theories, is still more difficult to characterize or even name. Perhaps the term mysticism will be appropriate, for the anti-intellectualism of several of our contemporaries, such as Barth, Brunner, and certain writers of Dutch extraction, is in some ways reminiscent of the later medieval mystics. Negatively they can be said to agree in that they reject empiricism, but a positive statement without many qualifications might prove impossible to formulate. However, one does not distort history too greatly by affirming that they all stress the unity of the truth and react against epistemological atomism. They also stress the contribution of the human mind to the resultant knowledge; not, however, as Kant did in using categories for the formation of judgments; but rather by introducing non-logical factors. They might thus be more included to understand Christ's claim, "I am the truth," literally, and they might say that truth is not propositional but 'personal.' The more recent of these writers in their stress on the person emphasize the noetic effects of sin; for if sin contaminates the whole man as a unitary person and thus vitiates his intellectual processes, it follows that the truth he has constructed or reconstructed by his intellectual operations cannot be pure or uncontaminated.

Inclined as they are to mysticism with its reliance on analogies, they might describe the epistemological situation by the view from this widow. Here in Luzern today one can look down on the Vierwaldstättersee and up to Mount Pilatus. But it is rainy and very cloudy. Instead of seeing one tree or crag distinctly, the mystic tourist sees the whole confusedly. The trees, the mountains, and the clouds merge in dim shapes. That is to say, no human being can see or know any single, pure, distinct truth, but he may have a cloudy perception of all truth as a whole. This analogy is supposed to be consistent, not only with the noetic effects of sin, but also with the infinite glory of God. Around about God are clouds and thick darkness that human eyes cannot pierce. Of him Bonaventura says we have a global representation for which the intuition is lacking. And if God is truth, literally and without qualification, obviously man cannot have the truth.

Emil Brunner states explicitly and accepts an implication of this position, which others have missed, or have not seen so clearly, or even try to repudiate. Since on the mystical view intellectual distinctions are inadequate to the existential situation and logic cannot cope with life, it follows that if God can speak to man, the revelation may consist of false propositions. The sentences in the Bible may be both revelatory and false. In fact, Brunner might even have concluded that all propositional revelation must be false, for in his Divine-Human Encounter he says that not merely the words but their intellectual content itself is a mere framework or receptacle and not the real thing. And there are professing Christians who have said publicly that the human mind simply cannot grasp truth at all.

On the subjective side of the epistemological problem these objections out to be clear. When the unity of truth and personality is so stressed that one must be omniscient in order to know anything, the theory for all its superficial piety is as skeptical as Hume's. But the difficulty on the objective side is perhaps not so obvious and may require further explanation. It is that this view provides no clear definition of truth. Naturally, if nothing is clear and all is cloudy, the meaning of truth is equally obscure. Not only is it impossible to distinguish between a mountain and a cloud, for only in virtue of the clear and distinct perceptions on a sunny day can one believe that there are mountains among those cloudy shapes, but what is worse, the human mind does not know the meaning of mountain and cloud, i.e. of truth and falsity. These meanings must also be clear and distinct items of pure knowledge which the theory makes impossible. This may explain the appeal to unintelligible paradoxes, silent traces, or voluble analogies.

There is a third view of truth that attempts to escape these difficulties. It might be called apriorism, presuppositionalism, or intellectualism, if these terms are not too definitely connected with earlier, specific systems. The subjective aspect of this theory requires a body of apriori forms or truths as a guarantee against skepticism. In empiricism the mind begins as a blank sheet of paper, and to use Aristotle's phrase, it is actually nothing before it thinks. Then sensation furnishes data. But the apriorists find themselves unable to understand how universal and immutable truth can be constructed out of constantly changing particulars. How can the laws of logic, which are not sense data, be constructed from bits of experience when these bits must first be connected by the laws of logic? How can alleged data bear any meaning apart from presupposed logical forms? The classification of data or even of one datum can be made legitimately only through the use of universal principles not contained in momentary particulars.

A Christian who adopts this view does not find that it lacks Scriptural support. The Reformed doctrine of the image of God in man attributes to man's mind or soul characteristics which come directly from the act of creation and not from sensory experience. Man's original endowment contained both knowledge and righteousness. Scripture does not describe the soul, either before or after the fall, as blank or actually nothing. So ineradicable is this original knowledge that even when a depraved sinner wishes to extrude God from his mind, he cannot do so, but retains some recognition of the divine majesty and the moral law written on his heart.

It is in this way that apriorism avoids the deadly dilemma of omniscience or skepticism. Instead of beginning with nothing and failing to arrive at universal propositions through sensation, and instead of beginning with everything and failing to explain our present extensive ignorance, apriorism allows a body of primary principles on which further knowledge may be built up.

On the objective side of the problem also, apriorism or intellectualism would seem to offer less difficulty than the competing views. The unity of truth is preserved without sacrificing the clarity and distinctness of several truths because truth is conceived as a system of truths. While a person may know

this or that proposition without knowing its place in the system, the proposition itself is objectively a part of a logical whole. It derives its meaning from the system although the person in question may not know the derivation. At this point a short exposition encounters a formidable obstacle. One may hastily assume that when two persons write or speak on the same words, they have expressed the same proposition. This is not always so, and after a long and confusing philosophic interchange it may seem never to be so. At any rate, certain terms and sentences which are verbally identical, in Riemannian and Euclidean geometry for example, do not express the same truth. Their message depend on the systems from which they are taken. The result can be subjective confusion, but objectively the unity and diversity of truth is maintained.

This distinction between the subjective and objective aspects of the question also enables the Christian apriorist to do justice to the noetic effects of sin. In the philosophy of paradox knowledge is so conditioned by the human mind that the result can never be pure or true. If God speaks to us, what we hear must be false. On this third view the objective truth of a proposition is not affected by sin. Sin and its guilt attaches to persons, not propositions. The power and result of sin is found in the subjective confusion of philosophic discussion, in some thought not all instances of ignorance, in all errors of logic, and of course in the ordinary moral or practical use to which propositions are put. It would seem that these spheres suffice for the noetic effects of sin; but if something has been omitted, it cannot be the truth of the propositions themselves – on pain of denying the clear and distinct truth that sin has noetic effects.

In conclusion, the empirical view of knowledge seems to entail skepticism. Mysticism attempts to combine omniscience, ignorance, paradox, and a false revelation. Intellectualism, though it will require more elaboration before one can enjoy great assurance, hopes to escape these pitfalls.