

How Do We Learn?

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During the second half of the twentieth century, several apologetes—most of them otherwise orthodox—have tried to develop a theism based on sensory experience. Some of them are satisfied with a Thomistic cosmological argument for the existence of God without explicitly producing a complete empirical epistemology. Others seem satisfied with even less: Sometimes called evidentialists, they have tried to prove the truth of the Bible by archaeological discoveries. One at least is chiefly interested in history. A few go some distance into epistemology, but they usually—I could even say always—ignore basic questions, such as the production of abstract ideas from memory images. Examples of these somewhat varying groups are Stuart C. Hackett in his *The Resurrection of Theism*; Gordon R. Lewis in his *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*; and several works by John Warwick Montgomery, Clark Pinnock, and R. C. Sproul. There are differences among them, of course. Some are more explicit than others. Some are more consistent than others. But in general they are empiricists, denying *a priori* forms of the mind, and implicitly basing all knowledge on sensation.

Empiricism

This view has had a long and illustrious history. It began with Aristotle, from whom Thomas Aquinas derived his basic principles; John Locke had a slightly different version of it, which Augustus Toplady unfortunately pretty much accepted; plus John Gill, and with certain modifications, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield. Probably because of the latter two, the Platonic or Augustinian view has been often frowned upon. The Lutherans too, as for example Leander S. Keyser, have generally been Aristotelians. But not all. Dorner in his *A System of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh, 1881, Vol. II, 82) asserts that "the soul is never a mere *tabula rasa*, ... there is in it a world of the unconscious. If in our knowledge there is already inherent no innate relation to what is rational and good—a relation that is an original dowry of our nature and not our own work—then knowledge of truth and goodness as such is absolutely out of the question." This is a statement worth reading a second time.

If further Lutheran documentation is desired, one will find a less explicit and no doubt a different point of view in Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* (Concordia Publishing House, 1950). In the section entitled "Man before the Fall," he agrees that "image and likeness are synonyms," citing the verses quoted here. Though using slightly different language, he also accepts knowledge and righteousness as its components. But surely he exaggerates the extent of Adam's knowledge when he says that Adam "had such a grasp of the natural sciences as is unattainable today by even the most diligent study" (I, 517). Did Adam really foresee the recent upsetting discoveries about the rings of Saturn? Or the implanting of a mechanical heart in a human being? Aside from such imaginations, the basic difficulty, from the point of view of this discussion, is that Pieper seems to have no interest in the epistemological problem and therefore simply avoids it.

John Theodore Mueller, in his *Christian Dogmatics*, emulates his Lutheran predecessor. He is slightly more explicit than Pieper, and continues the exaggeration of Adam's knowledge. The difference is that Adam's whole scientific knowledge is pictured as *a priori*. Disturbed by evolution he wrote, "The evolutionistic view, according to which man was originally a brute, without the faculty of speech...is therefore anti-scriptural.... In addition to perfect moral endowments man was blessed also with great intellectual endowments, so that he possessed...an intuitive knowledge of God's creatures [science] such as no scientist after the Fall has ever attained" (206). Note that whereas Pieper simply assigned to Adam the same extensive knowledge, Mueller adds that this knowledge was "intuitive." If Adam's correct knowledge of the speed of light was not empirical but intuitive, the term *intuitive* seems to mean *a priori*. In any case, no such extensive knowledge is ascribed to Adam in the Scriptural verses Mueller quotes, viz., *Genesis* 2:19-20, 23-24. Neither writer is sufficiently clear, but the phrase "great intellectual endowment" and the word "intuitive" favor apriorism much more than they favor empiricism.

Unfortunately, however, Mueller had previously approved of the cosmological argument for the existence of God (143) as Pieper also had done before him. The two authors lack consistency. Neither of them seems interested in the present problem, nor is either so clear as Dorner.

Dorner rejected the blank mind. Even some Roman Catholics, a few centuries ago, defended apriorism: Descartes, Malebranche, Pascal, and the Jansenists. But all the wit of Pascal did not save them from the Jesuits.

Scripture Refutes Empiricism

Now, it seems to me that even the skimpy material in *Genesis* is sufficient to refute empiricism with its blank mind. First, since God is a God of knowledge, eternally omniscient, how could a being declared to be his image and likeness be a blank mind? Even apart from the explicit statements in the New Testament, *Genesis* says that God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. Since at that time they had no sensory experience of other people, must they not have had some innate intelligence to understand this command? Of course, an empiricist might insist that they had learned the meaning from observing animals. But this assumes that a fair length of time intervened between the creation of Adam and God's imposition of the obligation. One can better suppose that God gave instructions to Adam more immediately. This is rather obviously true of *Genesis* 2:16, 17. The command was given only moments after the creation. Of course, such a command was not a *priori* knowledge, but the intellectual equipment to understand it was.

There is more, too. Adam not only understood the command: He understood that it was God who gave it. Are we supposed to believe that he laboriously worked out the cosmological argument, including the physics that underlies it? And did he derive the concept of moral responsibility from his sensations? Though the account is brief, it seems that Adam knew he was obligated to worship God and obey him. But empiricism's cosmological argument is surpassed in its fallacies by the impossibility of deducing moral evaluations from factual premises, even should these premises be true. If an empiricist insists that the *Genesis* account is too brief to support such an interpretation, we can at least rely on the Pauline epistles. *Genesis* is not the only book in the Bible.

A subsidiary point is Cain's fear of punishment after he had murdered Abel. Evidently God had given Adam and his boys what we call the sixth commandment. They must have recognized this as a moral imperative. But is it at all possible to develop the idea of a moral imperative by watching trees grow in a garden? Note the point: The commandment itself may not have been innate, but the idea of morality must have been or the import of the commandment could not have been understood. Sensation at best might possibly give some factual information; but though this would be knowledge of what *is*, empiricism can never produce acknowledge of what *ought* to be.

Universal Propositions

Underlying all these details of both physics and morality lies the necessity of universal propositions. Not only are murder and idolatry wrong, but the laws of physics are asserted as applying universally. They are not supposed to have any exceptions. Physics is the clearer example. The law of the pendulum, to take an elementary example, is that the period of the swing is proportional to the square root of the length. The law asserts that this is true of all pendulums, all that exist now, all that have existed in the past, and all that will exist in the future. The law is a universal proposition; that is, it has no exceptions. Clearly this law cannot have been deduced from experiment or observation, for no one has observed all present pendulums or all past pendulums, and no one has observed any future pendulums. Hence empiricism can never justify any law of physics. If, now, sensory experience cannot justify a knowledge of natural phenomena, how could it possibly be of any use in theology? The principles of theology are all universal propositions. Of course theology includes certain historical statements such as "David was king of Israel," and this does not seem to be a universal. Actually it is, for David as the subject term is a class by himself, and all of that class is a king of Israel. But aside from propositions with individual subjects, the principles of theology—which give meaning to the historical events—are plain, ordinary universal statements. They cannot therefore be based on observation. For that matter, God cannot be observed.

The Laws of Logic

In addition to the failure of empiricism due to universal propositions, there is an even more fundamental factor. Every statement, even if particular, depends on the law of contradiction. Truth and error are incompatible. If all marhoucals are rhinosaps, there cannot be a single marhoucal that is not a rhinosap. We do not have to inspect the infinite number of the latter in order to assure ourselves that none can be found. Given the premise, we do not need to examine even one. That O ab cannot be deduced from A ab is a necessity of logic. And if our minds are not so constructed, we can never distinguish truth from error. But empiricism furnishes no necessity, no universality, no all, no none.

Indeed, it furnishes no *some* either. Whether the logical form be universal or particular, the proposition must have a subject term. All dogs are vertebrates; some dogs are black. Suppose now that the subject term, dogs, had five meanings. This is not unusual for English words. Consult *Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*. Look up the words *fast*, *curb*, *domestic*, *race*, *land*—not to mention *love*, *emotion*, *grace*, *religion*, and *virtue*. Each one will have possibly four, five and sometimes six different meanings. This frequently introduces considerable ambiguity, with the result that an argument, apparently logical, is actually fallacious. The fallacy can be avoided, sometimes with a bit of trouble, by specifying meaning one, meaning two, and meaning three. But there is a deeper problem. Suppose a given word has an infinite number of meanings. The word *fast* would then mean every word in the dictionary from the article "a" to "zyzzygetan," plus an unimaginable greater number. "Fast fast fast fast" would mean, "Today is last Tuesday" and "Washington discovered America in 1066." That is to say, a word that means everything means nothing. But this which is so obvious could not be deduced from any finite number of observations. It is a principle which must be accepted even before the term "observation" could be given any meaning at all. Therefore the use of any single word in an intelligible sentence depends on an *a priori* principle. No blank mind could ever discover this principle. One could phrase the principle as "a word, to mean something, must also not mean something"; or, "if a word means everything, it means nothing." Like the law of contradiction, it is a way of maintaining the distinction between truth and falsehood. And this distinction is the basic element in the image of God.

From the Horror File

Half-wit Theology

Our Horror File entry this issue is an essay by Stanley Mooneyham, President of World Vision International. The essay appeared in the June 1982 issue of *World Vision*.

The heresy of half-truth

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth...?" are familiar words to anyone who has served on a jury. Perhaps the oath would be better worded, "Do you swear that whatever you tell will be true?" since the whole truth cannot easily be compressed into the testimony of one person.

The whole truth generally is not arrived at simply or without tension. My experience is that most often whole truth is made up of contradictory half-truths.

For example, Calvinists are absolutely certain that a sovereign God alone controls people's destinies. Arminians are equally certain that people make choices of their own volition. Election/free will. Is one right to the exclusion of the other? Or does the tension between them provide something greater than either by itself?

Look at some other half/whole truths: law/grace, mercy/justice, forgiveness/judgment. The Bible presents more than a few in-tension biblical truths. How do you handle these two statements of Jesus: "Anyone who is not against you is for you" (*Luke 9:50, LB*) and "Anyone who is not for me is against me" (*Luke 11:23, LB*)?

Or *Isaiah 2:4*: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks"; and *Joel 3:10*: "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears"? There you have proof texts for both pacifist and militarists.

Can we understand Peter's confusion when, after the Last Supper, Jesus said, "If you don't have a sword, better sell your clothes and buy one!" (*Luke 22:36*), only to be told a few hours later, after he had slashed off a man's ear, "Put away your sword. Those using swords will get killed" (*Matthew 26:52*)?

Church history has its examples, too. In the fourth century, the Docetists insisted that Jesus was not a real living man who shared our human situation and felt our hurts. Emphasizing his divinity, they said Jesus only seemed to have a human body and that he did not actually suffer and die on the cross. This was one manifestation of Gnosticism, which was essentially a striving after a system by men who felt impelled to bring all truth into absolute harmony—a temptation that to this day gets us into trouble.

Arianism, on the other hand, argued that the Son was a finite being, different from the Father in essence. In other words, he was not truly God. The Council of Nicaea was convened in A.D. 325 to sort out the half-truths and develop a statement reflecting the whole truth. Half of the picture alone constituted heresy. Only together—God/man, divine/human—did they constitute wholeness.

For me, Christian maturity lies not in trying to resolve the conflict between contradictory half-truths, but in believing them both and holding them in appropriate tension. Heresy, it seems to me, results when you discard one facet of truth in favor of another facet of the same truth.

We in the West have taken our philosophy from the mentally tidy Greeks who found it hard to live with contradictory truth. They said, "If A is A, then A is not non-A." Thus A and B were mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. Agreeing with the Greeks, we find it hard to tolerate tension in truth. We have this compulsion to resolve everything into neat black-or-white categories, the sooner the better.

The rest of the world, including the world where Jesus lived, can more easily accept the gray ambiguity of real life. The Chinese, for example, don't have our trouble. When two people disagree in principle, they say, "A is right and B is not wrong." But because our faith is so propositional, we build it on the non-ambiguity of Hellenistic thought, forgetting that before faith is a proposition, it is a relationship.

In the physical world, competing tensions hold everything in place. You only need to look into the night sky to see how it works. Eliminate the pull of one planet and all the planets would move into new relationships. It is Earth's reaction to these pulls, and its own contribution, that literally makes the world go around.

What if we learned to use creatively the tensions of real life in our relationships instead of trying to eliminate them? What if, in church and family, instead of some one person, some one viewpoint, *having* to be right, we could gracefully admit that it may take several viewpoints to encompass "right"?

Evangelicals have trouble with that approach. When you "have the truth," it is so easy to judge. The Pharisees, who thought they had an exclusive franchise on truth, could lay it on both Jesus and John. Jesus describes them this way: "For John the Baptist doesn't even drink wine and often goes without food, and you say, 'He's crazy.' And I, the Messiah, feast and drink, and you complain that I am the glutton and a drinking man and hang around with the worst sort of sinners" (*Matthew 11:18, 19, LB*).

Could Jesus be saying, "John is right and I am not wrong"? He sarcastically concludes: "But brilliant men like you can justify your every inconsistency!" Inconsistency was all right, but paradox was not acceptable.

Is there then no such thing as an eternal verity? Of course there is, but it resides in a Person, not in a proposition. Jesus is *the* Truth. My beliefs may be true or they may be only my partial biased

interpretation of truth; but whichever, they are relative to the Absolute and I do well to treat them with more humility and less arrogance.

Otherwise I have joined the joyless circle of those who, since time began, thought their own little piece of truth was all the truth there was.

Heresy, they called it when it happened long ago.

Perhaps it is still the right word.

Editor's comments: It is obvious that Mr. Mooneyham is confused and needs to be taught. Unfortunately, he occupies a position in which he teaches instead. But what is worse is the arrogant manner in which he declares that not only does he not need to be taught, he is not interested in learning. He has deliberately adopted a view of the Bible that makes it contradictory, riddled with what he calls "contradictory half-truths."

"Christian maturity," Mooneyham writes, "lies not in trying to resolve the conflict between contradictory half-truths, but in believing them both and holding them in appropriate tension." I judge that to be the definition of insanity, not maturity. No one can believe two contradictory propositions, knowing them to be contradictory.

"What if," he writes, "instead of some one person, someone viewpoint, *having* to be right, we could gratefully admit that it may take several viewpoints to encompass 'right'?"

How about including the viewpoint that truth is non-contradictory, that A is A, and that Christ is the Logic that lights every man? The whole purpose of Mooneyham's essay is to exclude one viewpoint—Christianity—from the list of acceptable viewpoints.

"Heresy" is the right name all right, but it applies to Mooneyham's half-witted theology. God is a God of truth and order, not ambiguities, contradictions, and confusion. Mooneyham, and all those like him in positions of authority, ought to be cashiered quickly. -- John W. Robbins

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