

An Essay on Truth

BEFORE BACON

Pilate asked the simple question 'what is truth?' almost two thousand years ago and men are still struggling for a satisfactory answer to it. For the ancient Greek philosophers (as Plato), truth was discovered in contemplation; for modern man, truth is found in consequences. The ancient thinkers were content with the vision of truth, but modern men desire truth in action. For the modern world is not content in seeking causes, as the ancients were, but in producing effects. Furthermore, for modern man the sphere of truth is not beyond the world but within the world. That is, truth is not theocentric but anthropocentric. In brief, for the early Greeks truth was sought in cosmological explanations of this world, for the later Greeks following Plato truth was located in the realm of the ontological beyond the world, and for the medieval Christians truth was expressed in the theological dogmas of the church. But modern men have sought rather to create their own truth in the practical realm of their own experiences in this world.

Unlike his predecessors, modern man has not been content with a mere meditation on nature: he seeks truth in the manipulation of nature. That is, man is no longer passive but, rather, he assumes an active role in the formation of truth. Truth is not merely in things, if it is there at all; rather, it is in man's thoughts about things. The ancients believed that they had reached truth when the mind conformed to reality, but the moderns feel that truth is attained when reality is made to conform to the mind. Man wishes no longer to be the servant of his world but to be the master of it.

It was a convergence of forces that brought about this great revolution of truth, this renaissance, in the modern world. Initially, there was Ockham's nominalistic 'razor,' which cut the throat of the medieval metaphysics, by allowing general words to have only a mental or conceptual status, as opposed to an ontological or real referent beyond this world. But as Ockham's 'razor' symbolized the shaving away of the old world of scholastic truth, it was Galileo's telescope that pictured man's gaze through his own inventive genius at the unlimited horizons of the new world of scientific truth. Now by a technological revolution man would create a whole new world of truth that was all his own. As the simultaneous resurgences of Nationalism and Religious Reformation indicated, modern man would affirm his liberty and individuality in his new quest for truth.

BACON'S 'BEES'

As Ockham's 'razor' cut away the old approach to truth, and as Galileo's telescope opened up the new world of truth which modern man was to be active in creating, it was left for Bacon's 'test tube' to provide the basic scientific tool for the attainment of these new truths. Francis Bacon was one of the most articulate spokesman of the new experimental method for discovering truth. His lively expressions of this new scientific approach to truth seemed to offset whatever inadequacies his philosophy contained.

However, before this new method of truth could be established, Bacon felt compelled to cast down the false idols of the old method. Modern man must no longer worship, said Bacon, the epistemological "Idol of the Tribe,"

which distorts truth by reading into nature the false images of man's own mind — attributing to nature an order which is not there. Likewise, man must no longer bow down to the social 'Idol of the Cave' which limits his vision of truth by the narrow blinders of education and tradition. The communicational 'Idol of the Marketplace,' must also go, for through the association and popularization of language, precision is lost in the pursuit of truth. Finally, Bacon contended that modern man must abdicate the philosophical 'Idol of the Theatre,' the nonsense of the learned philosophers like Plato and particularly Aristotle, who 'formed the world out of his categories.'

Bacon bids modern man to turn away from metaphysical and scholastic 'spiders,' who spin truth out of their own dialectical webs. In like manner, he warns against being empirical 'ants,' who store up observations from which they live in their long inactive winters. Bacon, rather, urges men to become scientific 'bees,' which extract the nectar of nature and transform it into the honey and wax of practical products. He exhorts them to become busy in the business of experimentation and in the cultivation of a strong relation between the knowledge of nature's causes and the control of nature's operations.

DESCARTES' 'DUBITO'

For Bacon, truth was to be found in the control of the external world by means of induction and experimentation, a posteriori. With Descartes, however, another approach to truth begins — an a priori approach which proceeds by an intuition and examination of the internal world of mind. Since empirical knowledge is uncertain, and since experimentation can at best produce only probable results, Descartes sought by meditation and intuition to discover a clear and certain idea upon which he could base a system of unquestioned truth. He looked for a clear and indubitable idea or thought rather than for a vague and indistinct sensation or thing.

The method of Descartes' meditations was methodic and universal doubt (Dubito). As a result, only that which could not be called into question would be considered indubitable and, therefore, true. And, since the only thing that Descartes could not in some way doubt was the cogito, "I think, therefore, I am," his own thought became the starting point of a new approach to truth. Truth was not in things, as it was for many before him, but in thought. One must begin with the only fact he cannot doubt, viz., that even while he is doubting, he is thinking—this truth he cannot doubt.

Descartes' dream was to build a system of indubitable truth. For such a system he had found the starting point in methodic and comprehensive doubt. But what undoubted method could he use to build a system which would be as indisputably true as the starting point? It could not be one of the traditional philosophical methods of his ancient or medieval predecessors, for these had produced only doubts and disputes. Since mathematics alone provided clear and distinct ideas, along with demonstrative conclusions, Descartes' method must be mathematical. In such a manner was born the second great stream of modern thought, Rationalism.

For the rationalist, truth was innate or native to the mind. One need not, and indeed could not, base certain truth on uncertain, unclear, and indistinct sense experience (as empiricists do). Rather, truth must be discovered in 'clear and distinct' ideas. For Descartes the basic idea must be an 'indubitable' idea. For other rationalists (as Spinoza), truth was found in the perfect Idea of Infinite Substance, or in the ultimate idea or 'sufficient reason,' (as Leibnitz). But for each rationalist, it was an idea and not a

being; it was a thought and not a thing that was the sphere in which to locate truth.

HUME'S 'HABIT'

It was against this rationalistic stream of thought that David Hume lifted his gifted pen. As Locke and Berkeley before him, Hume launched his attack on 'innate ideas,' arguing that unless an idea is reducible to some basic sense impression(s) it is bogus. With passion in his pen, Hume urged that abstract reasoning which could not be reduced either to a sure, simple relation of ideas, or to some experiential, matter of fact data should be committed to the flames.

Hume's purely empirical method, as Locke's 'plain historical method,' gave definition to a distinct stream of modern thought that was already beginning in Bacon. For Hume an idea was true only if it was based on sense impressions, and since all sense impressions are derived from sense experience (a posteriori), then truth is built up from the generalizations of experience. Truth is not to be found in any universal and necessary ideas (a priori). This means that there are no certain truths, because there are no things in experience which have a necessary connection between them. All events are 'entirely loose and separate,' and the only foundation for one's belief in the connection is a customary or habitual cojoining of things in experience. "Things are cojoined but never connected," wrote Hume. It is a posteriori custom and not a priori concepts that links things together. Therefore, truth is a matter of one's belief in the regularity of nature and not a knowledge of these unknown relations between things. One has no way to know that what is conjoined today will be connected in the future. In brief, truth is declared by conceptual generalizations which are derived from empirical observations, which are in turn founded on one's belief in customary or habitual conjunctions.

KANT'S 'CATEGORIES'

Hume's empiricism awakened Kant from his rationalistic slumber, by showing that the truth must get its content from experience, a posteriori, and not from the mind, a priori. Hume's enquiry into human understanding did, however, open the door for subsequent research into the secret springs of human knowledge. It was at this point that Kant contended that while the content of knowledge must come from experience (as in Hume), nevertheless, truth must get its form or structure from the a priori categories of the mind. For Hume, it was experience that made the operation of the mind possible; for Kant it was the operation of the mind and perception that made experience possible. That is, the a priori 'forms' of perception and 'categories' of thought were the very grounds which made experience and knowledge possible.

Kant, like Hume, would not allow mere relational truths of ideas (called 'analytic' by Kant) to 'add' anything to our knowledge or to 'say' anything about matter-of-fact experience, for they were purely and simply the necessary relations of ideas in which the predicate could be deduced from the notion of the subject. On the other hand, Kant could not allow that all statements of matter-of-fact experience were merely 'probable.' Some empirical judgments were certain and true, such as those to be found in Newtonian physics and mathematics. But for a statement to be certain it must depend on the necessary a priori structure of the mind to give it a necessary form; and in order for it to 'say' or 'add' something to our knowledge, that is, in order for it

to be more than analytic or definitional, it must possess some concept in the predicate which was not already contained in the subject. In Kantian words, it would be 'synthetic.' Therefore, if it is to be 'synthetic' and yet certain, it must be a 'synthetic a priori' proposition.

Kant's 'synthetic a priori' judgments would solve Hume's problem of the lack of certitude, for the 'necessary connection' is provided by the a priori categories of thought. However, in 'solving' the problem of certitude, Kant raised the more consequential question of the objectivity or reality of truth. For, accepting the Kantian conclusion, the mind can never know things as they really are but only as they appear to be after the senses and mind have 'formed' and 'categorized' them by their own internal structure. What things are really like (called noumena by Kant) one can never know, since the mind by imposing its a priori structures upon them can, thereby, only know what they appear to be (called phenomena) after they have been constructed according to the mind's categories and not as the things really are in themselves.

CONSEQUENCES OF KANT

The Alternatives to the Kantian Disjunction.—As a consequence of Kant's disjoining of reality and appearance, any would-be pursuer of truth since Kant has been faced with marked alternatives. It is in this sense that Kant has become the "cross-road" of modern thought. If one cannot know reality or the noumena, then he is left with three basic alternatives: (1) He may know the phenomena. In fact, as Hegel did in his Absolute Idealism, he may affirm that the phenomenal is the real and begin to work out a phenomenology of human consciousness. Or, as Husserl's phenomenology, one may simply bracket the phenomena and consider their essence apart from the question of their existence. That is, by prescinding from the question of whether or not there is any meaning beyond the phenomena of human experience, one may endeavor to create meaning of truth out of his own subjective consciousness.

(2) Those not satisfied that the phenomena is the real, or desiring to go beyond it, have had to construct other means. Heidegger, ~~constructing with the phenomena of human consciousness~~ ^{others} attempted an existentialism which ~~could~~ ^{Heidegger} speak of the Being beyond being. Others, convinced that they could not get at the ultimate truth of reality in a philosophical way, sought it in the realm of the non-rational (3) Kant's immediate successors, Fichte and Schelling left the sphere of Kantian pure reason and identified the noumena within the practical realm of will. In Fichte's Subjective Idealism the real is not identified with the thing-in-itself of Kant but the individual ego-in-itself, which is absolute and unconditioned. In Schelling's Objective Idealism the real is identified with the universal cosmic will, which is the absolute source and ground of all true judgments and which reveals itself in human consciousness.

Others have used their will to take a 'leap of faith' across the chasm that separates man from ultimate truth (as Kierkegaard). Less daring attempts have opted for a direct intuition of truth in the real duration of experience (as Bergson), or have been content with a mystical but unexpressible experience of it (as Wittgenstein and Otto). Those who feel incapable of contacting reality in any of these ways have decided to 'will to believe' it because of its practical, 'cash-value' in one's life (as William James) or else to superimpose theoretical 'nets' or 'patterns' upon it for whatever uses they may be able to make of it (as the Logical Positivists).

Transcending the Kantian Disjunction.—Most modern attempts to build a bridge across the Kantian chasm between appearance and reality have not met

with widespread acceptance. For they tend either to beg the question as to whether there is a 'gulf' (as non-critical Realisms), or else they fail to convince others that their 'bridge' really reaches on both ends (as critical Realisms). Consequently, in the contemporary quest for truth, many have tended to wait for or depend on some kind of 'break through' from the other side (the noumena). That is, if man is unable to discover the truth for himself, then he has to depend on the truth being disclosed to him. If the revelation comes, as it did for Karl Barth through the Bible, then one can proclaim that Truth is transcendent. If, on the other hand, the Truth does not 'break through' from beyond, then one may proclaim that God is dead and use his individual 'will-to-power' to create his own truth in an otherwise meaningless world (as Nietzsche), or affirm the blind cosmic will-to-live despite this painful and pessimistic world (as Schopenhauer), or to wait hopefully for some kind of epiphany or reappearance of God (as Altizer). Those more confirmed Atheist who see 'no exit' for man in his dilemma (as Sartre) will have to content themselves with some such human project as Marxism provides in order to make whatever meaning they can out of their absurd existence.

It would seem then that post-Kantian thought has been saddled with three equally painful alternatives: (1) the seemingly futile attempt to build a philosophical bridge between the phenomena of experience and the noumena or real world beyond it; (2) to rest content with the phenomena as the real, without attempting to go beyond it; (3) or to suggest some non-philosophical way of getting at the noumena such as will, faith, intuition, or revelation. The very multiplicity of attempts to deal with the Kantian dilemma reveal the frustration of modern philosophy in its quest for the truth about reality.

What apparently has not occurred as a live alternative to many modern philosophers is to reject the Kantian dilemma which precipitated the whole difficulty. That is to say, a critical reappraisal of the grounds upon which Kant built his bifurcation of appearance and reality seems to reveal that not only did Kant not eliminate knowledge of the noumenal world but that his position actually necessitates such a knowledge. For the position that we can not know what the real is, is in itself meaningless, unless it already presupposes enough knowledge about the real to make the assertion that reality is unknowable. In other words, it is not possible to limit the realm of real knowledge without transcending those limits. If then it is necessary to affirm a knowledge of noumenal reality in the very attempt to deny it, then it would seem that herein is a firm epistemological foundation upon which one can build his realism. Man is in contact with the real, and any attempt to deny it really affirms it. Once this fact is firmly established that truth is knowable and that reality is intelligible, then men can begin again their task of elaborating and relating truth to their lives, rather than searching fruitlessly for what is either unattainable or un-intelligible to human reason.