

NATURE AND EPISTEMOLOGY

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“IF the undergraduate,” says a modern college president¹ “can only get it through his head that Christian morals and natural morals are two quite different things . . . that they differ in aim and in purpose a vast confusion may be resolved.” But the vast confusion observed in the lives of the present generation so far from being resolved by a consideration of nature as alien to the Christian life is partially the result of that attitude. For the distinction Mr. Bell would make between natural morals and Christian morals is the result of an ambiguous hybrid of epistemology and ethics, the identification of nature with half-knowledge, which, in the background of theological and philosophical speculation for some centuries, threatens to darken the landscape.

No one will deny that a real relation exists between ethics and epistemology. The two are at one concerning the nature of good and of evil. Each concedes the synonym of the abstract terms, truth and good, error and evil. But though they meet on this one ground, ethics is as far removed from epistemology as the concrete is from the abstract. Ethics deals with the relating of experience; epistemology, with the reverberation of reality. There is no separation between life and knowledge, but there is a difference of degree between the theory of life which is truth, or knowledge, and the theory of the theory, which is epistemology. Because of this difference, the meeting-ground of ethics and epistemology is also the dividing line between them. It has been this indeterminate relation which has brought about that opposition between nature and spirit which sets the one as the principle of reason over against the other as the unreasoned principle, or blind force. And for such concep-

¹ *The Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1928. *The Church and the Undergraduate*, p. 505, by Bernard Iddings Bell, President of St. Stephens College.

tion, ethics has borrowed the knowledge-levels discovered by epistemology which belong to the theory of knowledge as such, and which applied to the self merely make for a confused notion of what the earth-life is all about.

II

In individual experience the body is at once a place and a possession though in its intimacy of relation to the thinking self it exceeds that of any other place or possession to an almost unimaginable extent. However, since the dawn of speculation the body has been identified more or less with the devilish principle. This identification has been strengthened by the ancient human desire to repudiate disease and death but it has its roots in nature's alignment with half-truth by the epistemologists.

Experience has always shown that first judgments are subject to change. The necessity for hard and patient thinking was manifest from the earliest adventurings in philosophy. The pre-Socratics already had put reflection beyond naive experience in value for attaining truth. Illusory appearance was attributed to the deceit of the senses before the sophist Protagoras identified thought with sense-perception as one process. Believing, like earlier thinkers, that perception is conditioned by organic changes in both percipient and perceived object at the moment of contact, Protagoras' very definition of perception, or thought, made it unstable. So the great advance Protagoras made was lost even in the making; and perception to this day has hardly recovered from the equivocal position given it when Plato and Aristotle completed the giant task of proving against the sophists a universal validity for knowledge which Socrates, with his inductive doctrine, began.

In human experience knowledge progresses from a low state, which has been held identical with sense-perception since it is coincident with primary presentations, to a high state held as pure thought. For this reason the phenomenal world was considered by early thinkers as separated from a higher world of thought, by a difference of degree, if not of kind.² Plato taught then that the incorporeal world forms the object of science; but the mistaken

² Democritus expressed the difference between perception and thought in quantitative terms: Obscure insight or perception, and genuine insight or thought, result respectively from the atomic motions of coarse and fine images of things.

notion drawn from his teaching was that the phenomena of the natural world of the senses are manifestations of immaterial realities, the Ideas, which exist side by side with them just as partial insight (Protagorean perception) exists side by side with true insight. Nevertheless the most careful studies of Plato reveal his conception of the Idea as purely epistemological: The first great epistemologist meant by the Idea what modern epistemologists mean by value; he meant by phenomenon what they mean by fact. In other words, Plato taught that knowledge about things and events is progressively intelligible; and he used the terms "intellectual" and "sensuous" as convenient names for knowledge-divisions, and was at times confused in his own statements by the nomenclature.

Aristotle, more scientist than philosopher, mapped out a system of development from the lowest expression of reality in truth which he called matter, to the highest, or pure form. The relation of matter as mere possibility to form as complete actuality removed for Aristotle the difficulties of separation which he thought he found in Plato's doctrine. But while there is present an epistemological monism in form and matter taken as two sides of one and the same reality, still the Aristotelian system stresses a marked dualism of the resistant passivity of matter, and, opposing it, the purposive activity of form. And as Plato also had done Aristotle applied these limits to bodily and psychical activities, an application anticipating St. Paul and St. Augustine. An anthropological dualism thus grew out of the inevitable application of epistemology to human-conduct—inevitable because of the very nature of truth which makes difficult the limiting of the theory of knowledge to its particular field.

III

Philo Judaeus who lived during the first century A. D. fell into the pitfall laid by epistemology. In his reinterpretation of Judaism in the light of Greek philosophy there is found dominant the note of contrast between spirit and flesh. Spirit, man's true nature, Philo believed, must engage in continuous strife with man's false nature, flesh, which actually imprisons and retards the spirit in its development. It is interesting to note that Philo remaining in the fold of Judaism insisted on the spirit-flesh antagonism which his contemporary, Saul of Tarsus, emphasized after his conversion.

With Philo the reason was admittedly the result of having ingrafted Greek thought into the Hebrew faith; and Paul, of philosophical training, was the first among the Christians to take the cross as a symbol of spirit's literal triumph over the flesh.

Two centuries later than Philo and St. Paul, Plotinus made a forthright identification of the corporeal world with partial-truth. The famous metaphor of the founder of Neo-Platonism, drawn from its prototype in the Republic, though mystically and poetically suggestive, is a penetrative analysis of the learning process. From truth's exhaustless source light emanates first as spirit, then as soul and finally at its farthest reach forms a twilight with matter. Matter is dark space, sheer ignorance, or sheer evil. Plotinus shows in this extraordinary figure that truth is unchanging and unchangeable as Parmenides had claimed for it before Plato. He gives the nature of truth in its least manifestation. In the process of knowledge the more light and fuller needed is obtained not by the absorption of anything external to the thinker but by the mind's return to itself. There is the further illumination of truth's nature: The effect of higher determinism if abstracted from this cause appears as blind behavior. *Unreasoned power is the express rebellion against truth.* What is usually overlooked in Plotinus' remarkable snapshot of the thinker at the moment of complete knowledge is that the picture has no content, but is of mere knowledge-theory.

IV

Whatever may be the ultimate meaning of nature, it is not found in setting it over against spirit as its lower stage. And to identify nature and spirit with knowledge-states, diametrically opposed because taken from their continuum in knowledge-process, ends by making epistemology absurd and experience futile.