

A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF CERTAIN ASSUMPTIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE INERRANCY OF THE BIBLE

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This article will attempt to identify and probe philosophically certain assumptions of a leading formulation of the doctrine of the inerrancy of the Bible. As a preliminary matter, a possible conceptual confusion in that formulation of the doctrine will be examined. The formulation to be scrutinized is that of the major association of scholars whose sole stated condition for affiliation is belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures.

Accordingly we read in the current promotional brochure of the Evangelical Theological Society that its founding members took the following belief to be the only one "of supreme importance" in forming the Society: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs." This belief, introduced in the promotional brochure as a "creedal statement," or called "the doctrinal basis" of the Society in its *Journal*, is obviously an enthymeme—i.e., an incompletely stated syllogism. The suppressed major premise is the following: The Word of God written is inerrant in the autographs. The fully stated syllogism would read thus:

The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written.

The Word of God written is inerrant in the autographs.

Therefore the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is inerrant in the autographs.

As the ETS is not content to ask its members simply to assent to the conclusion of that argument however one might arrive at it but rather demands agreement with the whole syllogism, that suppressed major premise bears scrutiny.

By making explicit the major premise we bring to the forefront the old issue as to whether there is a conceptual confusion in referring to linguistic phenomena in the form of written symbols as being the locus of revelation. Since the autographs of the Scriptures are collections of symbolic markings on objects suitable for the purpose, it seems odd to think of them as revealed of or by God. Any educated person can make intelligible marks on smooth, flat surfaces. That for which God's involvement would be a necessary condition is the truth of what was conveyed by those linguistic symbols. As has been said many times, propositions—not sentences—are in the primary sense what can be true or false. Sentences can be effective or ineffective in expressing a statement or proposition. This is the reason for Gordon Lewis' suggestion that the term "infallible" be reserved for the never-failing ability of the words in the autographs to convey the revealed truths, while the term "inerrant" be reserved for the truth of what is expressed by those symbols—viz., the revealed propositions.¹

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¹G. Lewis, *BETS* 6 (Winter 1963) 18-27.

This is a helpful distinction, but it must not lead us to overlook the fact that what is said—i.e., the proposition—can never exist apart from the means by which it is said—i.e., the sentence or other linguistic phenomena. The same proposition can be conveyed by different sentences, and the same sentence can convey more than one proposition, but a proposition cannot be conveyed in the absence of sentences or other appropriate symbols. Alan White puts it this way: “What is said is embodied in and has no existence separate from the various media in which it is said any more than a shape, which may be common to many objects, exists separately from the objects which have this shape.” By virtue of what he calls this “indissoluble” connection between “what is said and the medium in which it is said,” he claims that “what is said can occur wherever and whenever the appropriate words occur.” Hence he concludes that to read, preserve or change what is said is to read, preserve or change what is written.²

But is the converse true? Can we go from the statement “All manipulations of propositions involve manipulations of sentences” to the statement “All manipulations of sentences involve manipulations of propositions”? This kind of conversion will validly yield only a partial converse that is not equivalent in meaning to the original statement. That some, and possibly all, manipulations of sentences involve manipulations of propositions is the most we can infer from the assertion that “all manipulations of propositions involve manipulations of sentences.” Is there any reason apart from the formal logical process to think the conversion can be made without limitation? In light of the possibility of expressing the same proposition by different sentences, the answer appears negative. So it would seem, therefore, that in spite of the indissoluble connection between propositions or what is said and sentences or the means by which it is said, establishing the absolute effectiveness or infallibility of the sentences may not assure the inerrancy of the propositions.

Without failing in its symbolic function, a sentence could express a false statement. On the other hand, true statements cannot be expressed by ineffective sentences. The most favorable situation would be a fully effective sentence expressing a true proposition. For this to be actual two distinct conditions would have to be met, one linguistic and one metaphysical.

To which is the major premise of our ETS syllogism referring? “The Word of God written is inerrant in the autographs.” According to our analysis and construed literally this premise suffers from a confusion of categories, autographs being the kind of thing that could be infallible and the Word of God being the kind of thing that could be inerrant. As the syllogism we are examining is the only creedal commitment the ETS requires, one cannot refer to other doctrinal statements in order to construct the contextual meaning of the syllogism. The syllogism will have to stand on its own.

The conclusion of the syllogism reads thus: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is inerrant in the autographs.” Since this logically follows from the premises, the same mixing of categories appears here. There are two literal interpretations open. The conclusion could be affirming that the propositions conveyed by the Bible are inerrant, or the intent of the conclusion could be that the Bible as a set of linguistic symbols functions infallibly. If the former, then the syl-

²A. White, *Truth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970) 16.

logism is really arguing for the truth of the Biblical propositions on the basis of their source being propositional revelation as being coextensive with the Biblical propositions. If the latter interpretation of the conclusion to the ETS syllogism be taken—i.e., the one attributing infallibility to the linguistic phenomena of the Scriptures—then the intent of the syllogism is to argue for the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible in its autographs.

As the wording of the syllogism does not permit a final decision on the correct interpretation, we must take a leap of faith. However, the choice of wording, particularly the terms "Word of God" and "inerrant," would seem to place the center of gravity more to the side of propositional revelation. If so, then the thrust of the syllogism as a creedal statement is to provide a solution to the question of ultimate authority on the matters of common interest to the Society's members. Naturally those matters, for a theological society, concern God.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument at least, that the purpose of the ETS statement on the inerrancy of the Bible is to affirm the ultimate authority of the Bible on theological issues. Moreover, let us agree that the ground for this affirmation is the conviction that the source of the propositions contained in the Bible is God himself. The logical move made in the syllogism would then be from the fact of a statement having its source in God to the fact of its truth.

Having determined the content of a leading interpretation of the doctrine of inerrancy by deciding on its purpose for the group who give it that interpretation, we may proceed to identify and analyze a certain assumption about the source of religious knowledge.

Is a religious epistemologist who appeals to an inerrant book assuming an answer to the question of the extent of his religious knowledge in order to use the inerrancy of his book to ascertain whether he knows religious truths? Or is it the other way around? Is he assuming a positive answer to the question of whether he has religious knowledge in order to map out the extent of that knowledge?

This is an interesting issue, for its solution does not necessarily follow the approach one takes toward knowledge of ordinary objects. Most people are common-sense realists who begin by assuming a position on the question of the extent of knowledge—namely, that they know pretty well what they think they know. Any doubt in their mind concerns their criteria of knowing.

But what is the case with the religious believer who subscribes to Biblical inerrancy? Is an appeal to an inerrant book about God a starting point or a conclusion? Is it assumed that the extent of one's knowledge of God is limited to whatever the book says? Or is it assumed that the book is the sole fully reliable source of religious knowledge and, thus, the question of whether any putative item of knowledge about God is genuine is to be answered by the consistency of that item with the book? In the case of the latter assumption the criteria for determining whether knowledge of God be possessed are provided by the inerrant book, while the extent of that knowledge is indeterminate. In the case of the former assumption the extent of one's knowledge of God is determinate, while the criteria for deciding what counts as knowledge of God remain indeterminate.

Suppose the inerrancy of the Bible is held to solve the problem of the criterion of religious knowledge, leaving the extent of that knowledge open. This would permit the continual increase of religious knowledge marked by its compatibility with the Scriptures rather than limiting all religious knowledge to the proposi-

tions of the Bible. For instance, something could be known about one's relationship to God even though his or her name does not appear in the Scriptures. Assuming, then, an inerrant book to be the means of determining which items of knowledge are genuine, what justification can be made of this assumption? Specifically, is compatibility with the Bible as the criterion of religious knowledge justifiable by any knowledge known with certainty?

Before answering this question we need to justify it. Why, it may be asked, is certainty what is required? Would not something less than certainty suffice for the claim made for the role of an inerrant Bible in our assumption? It would be nice for such to be the case, for then an inductive inference from some of what Bernard Ramm calls the Protestant Christian evidences would yield the justification we seek. However, the Bible, which as inerrant functions as the final source of religious knowledge, cannot be thought to derive that function from a state of affairs that just probably obtains. An errant source of knowledge can be grounded on inductive inference, but hardly an inerrant source. At least this must be true if the source refers to itself as inerrant, which of course the Bible is understood to do by those who appeal to its inerrancy. As Edward John Carnell pointed out, the orthodox doctrine of inerrancy is neither derived from, nor jeopardized by, inductions from phenomena of the Biblical text.³

Is there anything known with certainty, then, that can substantiate the assumption that compatibility with the Scriptures is the criterion for religious knowledge? One possibility might be one or more statements of the kind Leibniz called "the first *a posteriori* truths or truths of fact." He contrasts them with "the first *a priori* truths or truths of reason." Both, however, are known directly. Here is his description:

The immediate awareness of our existence and of our thoughts provides us with the first *a posteriori* truths or truths of fact, i.e., *the first experiences*; while identical propositions embody the first *a priori* truths or truths of reason, i.e., *the first illuminations*. Neither kind admits of proof, and each can be called immediate—the former because nothing comes between the understanding and its object, the latter because nothing comes between the subject and the predicate.⁴

Roderick Chisholm calls Leibniz' "first *a posteriori* truths" the directly evident *a posteriori* or simply the directly evident.⁵ A directly evident proposition is either a self-presenting one—e.g., "I am thinking," "I seem to remember seeing him yesterday," etc.—or else one entailed by a self-presenting proposition—e.g., "There is someone who is thinking," which, while not self-presenting, is entailed by the statement "I am thinking."⁶ These kinds of statements need no justification, yet they can serve as evidence for the kind that do need justification. They constitute their own evidence.

Such directly evident truths will not be of help to us, however, for they refer to

³E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1961) 111.

⁴G. W. von Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* (ed. P. Remnant and J. Bennett; Cambridge: University Press, 1982) 434.

⁵R. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (2d ed., Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977) 46.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 24.

the knower's own beliefs, perceptions and thoughts. An inference from them to an independently existing state of affairs can never be made with certainty, unless that state be true of all possible worlds. Our assumption about the Bible clearly does not qualify on this score.

What about Leibniz' "first *a priori* truths," what Chisholm calls the "axiomatic"? These are the kind of statements that are necessarily true whether they appear evident to one or not (self-presenting statements always appear evident), are not evident just because they are entailed by self-presenting statements (unlike those directly evident statements that are not self-presenting), and, when accepted by anyone, are regarded certain. Aristotle describes them as basic truths. By that he says he means a proposition "which has no other proposition prior to it"; its truth cannot be demonstrated from more certain premises.⁷ A couple of examples are these: "If some men are mortal, then some mortals are men." "The sum of 2 and 2 is 4." Such propositions are obviously certain for anyone who accepts them. They are axiomatically true.

Is the assumption that the criterion of religious knowledge is compatibility with an inerrant Bible axiomatic? This would be the case only if there were no other fully reliable source of religious truth available. But it is not axiomatic that there are no other such sources. Direct revelations by God to the believer or even the nonbeliever are not only conceivable but also vehemently claimed by many people. Indirect but nongeneral divine revelations are also possible. General or natural revelation may play a role as well. Thus the Bible could well be inerrant and still not be the sole, or even the ultimate, source of religious truth.

The assumption that it is the ultimate source—the assumption made by those who founded a theological society on the one principle that "the Bible alone is inerrant in the autographs"—is considered by that society to be necessarily true because the Bible alone is the Word of God written.⁸ This is the minor premise of the ETS syllogism. But that premise itself is hardly axiomatic. Even if it were, that would not imply our assumption that the final test for religious truth is coherence with the Bible. There is always the possibility of nonwritten forms of the Word of God calling in question the primacy of the written form.

Suppose anyway that the Bible alone and in its entirety be the Word of God written, and suppose that God reveals himself in no other way—or at least in no other way that challenges the ultimacy of the Scriptures. Then it would be necessarily true that compatibility with the Bible is the criterion of theological knowledge. How can the truth of that supposition—let us call it supposition B—be established? Is it, for example, known *a priori*? As it is neither axiomatic nor implied by what is axiomatic, it is not known *a priori*. It is quite possible that the Bible is not the Word of God. If supposition B be true, it will be known *a posteriori*. However, that fact does not imply the impossibility of the supposition being necessarily true.

Chisholm points out that some of the necessary propositions that we accept may not be propositions that we know *a priori*. They may be such that, if we know

⁷Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸The concept of necessary truth used here is simply that of the nominal definition of a necessarily true proposition—namely, one that is true if and only if it cannot be false. See P. Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1970) 143 ff.

them, we know them *a posteriori*—on the basis of authority.⁹ His example of a necessary proposition *a posteriori* is a logical theorem accepted by virtue of its being declared true by a reputable logician.

Is the notion of a necessary proposition *a posteriori* not confused? After all, ever since Leibniz and Kant we are supposed to have seen clearly that those cognitions whose truth is discerned through experience are always conceivably false—that is, they are contingently true rather than necessarily true. Likewise concepts whose truth is known apart from experience are necessarily true. The distinction between the two kinds of cognitions, therefore, is the method of discerning their truth or falsity, whether by experience—the *a posteriori* ones—or independently of experience—the *a priori* ones. But Bernard Bolzano, while not discrediting that distinction, has rightly called attention to an equally important distinction not tied to the relation of propositions to our process of coming to know them. The distinction he has in mind rests on the inner characteristics of propositions—namely, the characteristics of necessity and universality. A proposition is necessarily true regardless of how we came to know it. Normally such propositions are known *a priori*. But use of this method is not what is meant by the necessity of a proposition. Thus it could be known *a posteriori*. Bolzano puts it this way, referring to Leibniz and Kant: “For, if what they meant by judgments *a priori* were identified by the definition that they are cognitions which are independent of all experience, then it would not have been necessary to add to this definition a pair of other characteristics which allow us to recognize judgments *a priori*, namely *necessity* and *universality*.”¹⁰

He agrees, further, that “a judgment can be objectively *a priori* although it is subjectively only *a posteriori*.” But whichever it is, its necessity is another matter, as is shown by the fact that only true propositions can be said to be necessary.¹¹

It will be recalled that we are concerned to establish the possibility of knowing *a posteriori* some propositions that are necessarily true because an appeal to authority is an *a posteriori* method of knowing. Moreover, we are interested in authority as a source of propositions necessarily true because the minor premise of the ETS syllogism as rephrased into our supposition B can only be taken on authority, if at all. Supposition B is not the type of proposition that can be contingently true, if it is to yield the conclusion to the ETS syllogism. The slightest possibility that the Bible alone and in its entirety is not the Word of God, and/or that there might be a more ultimate divine revelation, renders the conclusion that the Bible is inerrant in the autographs only probable. But the noncontingent truth of our supposition, as we have mentioned earlier, is not something known *a priori*. A Leibnizian might be willing to assign it the rank of an objective *a priori*, but not from our finite perspective.

The necessary truth of supposition B will have to be taken on authority or not at all, and nothing less than its being necessarily true will do. But whose authority is sufficient? Only God’s, assuming that supposition B is objectively *a priori*

⁹Chisholm, *Theory* 43.

¹⁰B. Bolzano, *Theory of Science* (ed. R. George; Berkeley: University of California, 1972) 183.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 184.

for him and assuming, with Descartes, that God will not deceive us.

What about the epistemological status of those latter two assumptions? Since supposition B is conceivably false, its being an objectively *a priori* judgment for God would have to be known by us *a posteriori*, if at all. Of course the source would have to be God. With respect to Descartes's and Leibniz' conviction that God is not a deceiver, we will have to content ourselves with the sobering thought that the supreme act of his deception might be convincing us that by definition he could not deceive us. In other words, we must recognize that an infinite Being could deceive in an undetectable manner. So the fact that he does not deceive must be taken on his authority, assuming he is not a deceiver. All of which, of course, brings us full circle.

The circle is not viciously so, contingent on our initial assumption being true—namely, the assumption that compatibility with the Bible is the ultimate criterion of religious knowledge—for the Bible declares God to be a nondeceiver. That assumption is safe contingent on the truth of supposition B—namely, that the Bible alone and in its entirety is God's Word written and he has revealed himself in no competing way. This supposition in turn is unobjectionable contingent on the truth of the Biblical claim to be the final arbiter in all matters of faith and practice. And that claim, again, is trustworthy contingent on God being the authority for that claim. Is he? The ETS syllogism does not argue for the answer to this question. It simply assumes the truth of the Bible's self-affirmation.

The net result is that those who subscribe to the ETS syllogism are not only answering the problem of the criterion of religious knowledge by appealing to the Scriptures, but also by the same move they claim to be solving the problem of the extent of religious knowledge. Whether one knows any particular theological proposition and what theological propositions there are to know are both determined by the Bible. Such an approach is never used in the ordinary knowledge of ordinary objects. Either what is known is taken as a given, as in common-sensism, and the criteria of knowing particular items are worked out; or the criteria of knowing are assumed, as in empiricism for instance, and knowledge claims are evaluated accordingly. Those approved by experience are added to the domain of knowledge.

Is this attempt to make the Bible serve double duty epistemologically viable? The ETS members hope so; they do not know so. They are hoping to be able to reduce what John Pollock would call a "contingent reason" for believing the Bible to be inerrant to a "logical reason," for they realize that unless this reduction be possible they do not actually have a contingent reason. Pollock divides all good reasons for believing something into two kinds: logical and contingent. Logical reasons are good just by their nature. For example, that the entire Bible is alone God's consummate revelation would be a good reason to believe that there is such a written revelation. A contingent reason, equally good, is a reason for someone to believe something if he has a related logical reason to believe it. For example, the claim that God said that the Bible provides ultimate religious truth would be a good reason for believing that the Bible has this property, provided one can justify the belief that God is telling the truth by a logical reason. The conjunctive statement that God has said this about the Bible and that he is telling the truth would be such a logical reason to believe that the Bible has the property he says it has. Thus unless there be an independent but related logical reason for believing

that God's saying the Bible is his final and authoritative word implies that the Bible has this quality, there can be no contingent reason for believing that the Bible has this quality just because he says so.¹² But it is precisely this independent but related logical reason that ETS members do not know that they possess. This of course does not at all mean that they do not actually possess it. The least that can be said on this is that there are arguments in the literature claiming that one can know something without knowing that he knows.¹³

The double assumption we are concerned with—namely, that the inerrancy of the Bible solves both the question of the criteria to be used in deciding whether one can have knowledge of God at all and the question of the extent of that knowledge—is not what is argued for in the ETS syllogism. It is assumed by that syllogism. It will be recalled that we had interpreted the logical move in the ETS syllogism to be one from the fact of a statement in the Bible having its source in God to the fact of its truth. That syllogism is not only valid but is also sound, contingent on its double-duty assumption. For then the Bible would have inerrantly authorized that assumption. In other words, that assumption would be what Chisholm calls a necessary proposition *a posteriori*, for only God and those whom he tells propositionally know who, if anyone, really knows theologically.

¹²Says Pollock, "By definition, if P is a contingent reason for S to believe that Q, then S must have an independent reason for believing that (P \supset Q)." J. Pollock, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: University Press, 1974) 35.

¹³See e.g. C. Radford, "Knowledge—By Examples," *Analysis* 27 (1966) 1-11.