

THE QUEST FOR OBJECTIVITY

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CONCRETE FACTS

Man's thought reveals recurrent expressions of his desire for objectivity. Various words have been used to express this continuing hope. The word empiricism has brought together the longing for what has been called the "concrete facts" of experience. At an earlier time when materialism was the prevailing philosophy, it seemed assured that man had finally achieved the hard facts upon which all tenable truths could be based. Even as early as Aristotle, the Platonic idealisms and subjectivisms were rejected in favor of a more scientific or empirical method. Later observations, however, revealed that the apparent purely objective method resulted in a congealed position known as Aristotelianism. This interesting fact revealed that the tendency of man to begin with a hypothesis based upon an empirical or objective approach to truth, and then the congealing of these inductive facts into a system of absolutism, has repeatedly characterized man's search for the "concrete facts" of truth.

The "idols" of Francis Bacon picture the difficulty with which man faces this problem. Bacon sought for the "expurgation of the intellect," to achieve a mind free from the human frailties and subjective tendencies that would obscure a true empirical approach to truth. These idols, as we remember, were the idols of the tribe suggesting man's general weakness and tendency to find support for belief rather than make honest investigations; the idol of the cave which represented man's individual perspective as scientist, painter, poet, or religionist and his tendency to view truth from the perspective of his individual point of view; the idol of the market place with which man obscured the objective search for truth by "fig leaf phrases" of advertising and commerce; the idol of the theater by which man constructed a shadow world or elegant, compact world which was not the real objective world. These idols suggest that Bacon hoped by calling attention to them we would automatically eliminate them. The experience of man, however, since Bacon, has shown that the mere calling attention and naming the "idols" or tendency of man to be human in his interpretation of truth has not eliminated the subjective element in his thought.

The interesting illustration given by Sir Arthur Eddington, called "Eddington's elephant," suggests that man in his desire for scientific objectivity has actually found, instead, abstractions and subjective interpretations of truth. The elephant, according to Eddington's parable,

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instead of being a live animal on the side of a hill, by science has been turned into a two-ton mass on an angle with a friction element created by grass on the hill. The final result, then, as suggested by Eddington is that science instead of achieving the concrete facts has actually turned a life situation into an abstraction that presents a limited concept of truth. The implication of this parable, of course, is that total truth involves more than mere concrete facts suggested by empirical science.

Even *Life* magazine has recently given editorial consideration to this problem under the heading, *A Discipline That Needs Some:*

"It's a pity no scholar has ever thought to do his doctorate on the number of creative minds that have been driven clear out of the academic world by the stultifying demands of 'scientific method' misapplied. Certainly in the social sciences, the tyranny of methodology and sheer jargon has long since got out of hand..."

"The quest is for a way to disentangle the true disciplines of scholarship from the whole materialistic and behavioristic approaches to existence—twin blights that have debased so much of 20th Century thought and ethics."¹

This quest has profound significance not only for the various academic disciplines but for western civilization itself. Has it not been the materialistic Marxist dogma that has hurt so many minds and masses in recent decades?

Our suggestion is not that empirical truth is not valid, but that empirical truth "misapplied" is a limited aspect or facet of total truth.

THE INFLUENCE OF AFFLUENCE

One limitation on pure objectivity has been the influence of economic factors and affluence. Plato was one of the first, in the *Republic*, to note the difficulty of man's achieving the purely objective point of view. After the very thorough training suggested for the philosopher rulers, Plato at the conclusion of the *Republic* suggests that even the "Ph.D." graduates in the field of Platonic idealism would need protection from the temptation to be influenced by property and materialism. A system of guidance for these leaders of the *Republic* was suggested which would protect them from themselves, from their subjective natures, which Plato called the "psychological problem." As Plato observes, "justice would be simple if men were simple." The communal state suggested by Plato for his philosopher rulers is really an admission of their continuing humanity and a possible influence of economic factors on their decision making even after extended, intensive training in the school of ideas. Furthermore, they were to be forbidden the having of wives because of the

1. *Life* magazine, September 24, 1965, p. 4.

possible influence of the wives on the decisions of the philosophers. The aggressive, prodding wife who drives her husband to seek greater and greater economic and political power is not evidently a recent invention.

Sociologists have pointed out the influence of affluence upon decision making. Their studies indicate that even religious groups are profoundly influenced by the growth of affluence within the community of the denomination. That which we cannot afford is usually considered worldly. When we have sufficient economic funds to buy the things which we here-to-fore condemned, we no longer consider such things "worldly."

The simple basic economic factors have often influenced the so-called "objective judgments" of scholars. The failure of the scholar to meet and to combat the Nazi movement in Germany, the Facist movement in Italy, the Communist take-over in Russia is one of the great shames on the intellectual in the history of thought. Only a few religionists were able to withstand the combination of economic, social, and power pressures brought to bear in Nazi Germany, and, of course, with Dietrich Bonhoffer, many of these men died rather than succumb to the intellectual dominant forces at the time. Such failures by the academic community have caused many to question the absoluteness of traditional, scientific authoritarianism. Some suggest that the use of the word "inductive" should no longer characterize the study of science. Brown and Stuermann in a recent text, *Elementary Modern Logic*, 1965, take this position. They point out,

Scientific activity takes on, for many, the characteristics of a religion. "Scientifically tested," "endorsed by men of science," and "established by scientific research" are typical of phrases used frequently and insistently by commercial and political propagandists, by businessmen and clergymen, and by housewives and students. Such expressions can, of course, be used properly and wisely. On the other hand, they are often used to persuade, to confirm prestige on some idea or product, to pick an unwise objective. "The contention that induction is the basic method of thought or procedure in science cannot be adopted without qualification, if it can be accepted at all. Whether there is such a thing as pure induction, starting with the particular and reasoning to a general rule, is highly questionable, as we will indicate through our examination of facts and generalizations. The principle mechanics of thought or inference in the scientific process is deduction."²

2. Brown and Stuermann, *Elementary Modern Logic* (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), pp. 214-15.

"Even more tragic is the perverse use of the name of science to try to make some contemporary viewpoint—in politics, economics, religion, etc.—appear to be a superior or final truth." "A misconception that must be described for proper understanding of scientific processes is that they are "inductive" or "empirical," while non-scientific disciplines are "deductive" or "theoretical." This bifurcation reflects a failure to recognize the dominant role that deduction and theory plays in even the most elementary scientific studies.

Many of us would not care to equate the scientific process with deduction. However, it is very significant to observe the strong reaction against empirical dogmatism among such recent scholars. The suggestion that the "scientific method" and "science" have become status symbols by which not only products but ideas have been sold should be given serious thought. And the very human tendency to allow affluence to influence judgments should be watched carefully if it is true that "man can stand anything but prosperity."

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

Another roadblock in the quest for objectivity has been a recurring anti-intellectualism. In the recent past the philosophy of religious empiricism was seen in the writings of Schleiermacher, an advanced and devotional form of anti-intellectualism. Religious mystics have always contended that their direct apprehension and intuitive cognition of the will of God gave valuable insights. Strong views in this direction were advanced by what has often been called religious liberalism. A more appropriate designation would be "pre-war Protestantism." The values of this movement, however, were limited by the lack of definitiveness. Devotion without definitiveness led to the extreme of anti-intellectualism. Basic concerns for truth values voiced by many were stilled by the gentle suggestion that adequate emphasis upon pietistic religious experience of God excluded the necessity for guide-lines of revelational truth.

Perhaps the most violent anti-intellectual revolt against the "objective facts" of the scientific method has been the dynamic contemporary movement of existentialism. The "I-It" of Martin Buber symbolizes the world of objects and scientism against which existentialism finds itself in violent opposition.

The revolt is not waged in a context of repudiation of the traditional authoritarianisms of supernaturalism and religion, but against the "systems" of scientism. In this context scientific absolutes have become the fundamentalism which must be denounced as antiquated and passe. The "I-Thou" of inner existential confrontation and reality rejects any system that would violate its individual freedom and subjective awareness of truth.

The philosophy of Paul Tillich emphasizes "ultimate concern," and these ultimate concerns cannot be comprehended within the limited truth judgments of the scientific method. It is imperative that we go beyond the test tube and laboratory to truly comprehend "life," contends existentialism.

It is a strange phenomenon of our time that great intellectual institutions have been caught in such violent upheavals of anti-intellectualism. The existentialist sees very clearly that the extreme use of the scientific method which in many cases excluded individual, personal involvement in the search for truth violated man's respect for himself and

subjugated his personal integrity of experience to the cold impersonal domination of the machine, the microscope, and the laboratory. Existentialism is shouting that "all life is a meeting" as suggested by Martin Buber. Life is more than matter, more than the materialistic mechanism. Mind is more than body. Truth is more than hormone secretions. Respect for individual choice must never be obscured by the determinism of mechanistic science.

The extremes of this revolt, of course, contain the seeds of its own destruction. And already we see brief articles suggesting the re-investigation of the place of reason in relation to the pursuit of truth. It is no doubt safe to anticipate the not too distant swing of the pendulum in favor of a rationalism which has been thoroughly discredited by the anti-intellectualisms of many intellectual institutions today.

OBSURANTISM

A third limiting factor in the quest for objectivity that has plagued all phases of this search is the very human tendency toward obscurantism. Religionists, philosophers, and scientists have all in their turn contributed to the confusion and disaster of this quarrel. Dr. Alfred North Whitehead in his book, *The Function of Reason*, observes.

"Obscurantism is the inertial resistance of the practical reason, with its millions of years behind it, to the interference with its fixed methods arising from recent habits of speculation. This obscurantism is rooted in human nature more deeply than a particular subject of interest. It is just as strong among the men of science as among the men of the clergy, and among professional men and business men as among the other classes. Obscurantism is the refusal to speculate freely on the limitations of traditional methods. It is more than that: it is the negation of the importance of some speculation, the insistence of incidental dangers. A few generations ago the clergy, or to speak more accurately, large sections of the clergy were standing examples of obscurantism. Today their place has been taken by scientists—the obscurantists of any generation are in the main constituted by the greater part of the practitioners of the dominant methodology. Today scientific methods are dominant, and scientists are the obscurantists."³

This seems to strike at the basic root of our human dilemma in the quest for objectivity. As Aristotle found the "objective facts" and congealed them into one of the most dogmatic systems of all human history, men have always erected ivory towers of obscurantism from which they have voiced ex-cathedra statements of "final judgments" or "concerte facts." It is so difficult for us human beings to become self-conscious

3. Whitehead, Alfred North, *The Function of Reason* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1929), pp. 43-44.

enough to make proper evaluations of our own inherent subjectivity. After all, we are first of all men, then scientists, poets, philosophers, and religionists. It is a fascinating thing to sit at meetings over a period of years with scholars who pride themselves in academic freedom and objective judgments. One can anticipate in advance a good share of the shibboleths that will be repeated at these high level intellectual discussions. It is interesting to hear the readers denounce "absolute absolutely." Emotional presentations of anti-emotionalism are equally fascinating. Doctrinaire dogmatic depreciations of "vestigial doctrinal statements" are heard. These observations are made by very gracious men. Many of them are our friends, but it is difficult to communicate with them objectively because of the influences that have brought them into being. Many of these sincere, honest scholars are apparently completely unaware of their own intellectual Pharisaism because of social, philosophical, and human factors that have gone into their training and background.

There is a great truth in Martin Buber's emphasis that all thinkers walk a "narrow bridge" of scholarly investigation. We all operate intellectually from a precarious position. As Emerson suggested "man has his choice between truth and repose, he cannot have both." There is indeed as Buber suggests a "holy insecurity" in intellectual honesty. The basic question, then, of our discussion is, with all of the precariousness that surrounds our venture, is it important that we continue the quest for objectivity? Most of us who attempt to be relevant to our age would agree that the quest for objectivity must not be discontinued. We have viewed with considerable interest the gradual erosion of the so-called "concrete facts" of empiricism. Scientists and philosophers of science have turned from the dogmatism of original positivism to logical positivism. They have observed that there are concepts, truths, and human values that are not observed or understood by observation in a microscope. The microscope is still one of the basic investigative tools of man, and the values derived from it continue, but the scientist has broadened his perspective of truth. Logical positivism in some situations has developed into phenomenology in which men not only question the absoluteness of the scientific facts but question the possibility of finding meaning at all in the material and philosophical inquiries of mankind. The dialogue has continued in the schools of linguistic analysis so that it has become increasingly difficult for many to hold any concept having fundamental meaning that can be understood and communicated to others.

We have also noted the violent and at times emotional reaction of existentialism against the systematization of truth presented by what is now considered classical materialism of the scientific world.

Our problem of relevance in the context of contemporary thought is a difficult one. Shall we join with glee the reactionary movements that repudiate the honest intellectual disciplines that have pursued objective truth? Most of us today share the hope of the intellectual that it might

be possible to achieve some degree of objectivity in the pursuit of truth. In fact, evangelicals may be the strongest colleagues of a mature science which has grown up from evangelistic empirical dogmatism. The problem becomes one of basic method in approaching this truth. It would seem that the earlier advocates of extreme objectivity attempted to build a cyst around the private world of objective truth. It was their point of view, spoken or implied, that those who did not accept the basic frame of reference from which they concluded the "only tenable facts" were incapable of objectivity. It would seem that a wiser approach would suggest that we all are products of environmental and training circumstances that have led us to certain basic beliefs in philosophy, science or religion. We have observed the dangers inherent in insisting that our own individual perspective is the only possible route to objectivity. The declaration of one's position as the only objective position simply compounds the difficulty of achieving objectivity. It creates a doctrinaire dogmatism which is as absolutistic as the clerical dogmatisms which it originally opposed. With Alfred North Whitehead we would observe that the dominate power structure of any particular age controls the obscurantism of that age, and if Whitehead is right that scientism is the obscurantism of our age, it would seem to recommend careful observation of any decrees issued by this prevailing power structure.

Klausner and Kuntz, in their recent book *Philosophy: The Study of Alternative Beliefs*⁴ suggest in the title and throughout the book that philosophical assumptions are actually beliefs, that a basic philosophical frame of reference is arrived at by what might be called a leap of faith. To be sure, logic and reason contribute to the formation of assumptions, but in all areas of life that seem to really matter to man—in metaphysics, in politics, as well as in religion—belief goes beyond pure logic and pure reason. The simple admission of this fact, that we are human beings and conditioned by factors of training and background would seem to be the best beginning in the search for objectivity because if we can admit our humanity, we can perhaps more honestly guard against the emotional extremes and intellectual vagaries which the history of thought has shown us to have.

Considerations for the Quest

For the evangelical Christian this would suggest that we must include at least three observations in our consideration of contemporary assumptions. First, we should give respectful consideration to a viewpoint no matter how extreme it may seem to us at first. If we expect respectful treatment from others, it is imperative that we reciprocate by giving fair presentation of developing viewpoints whether or not our immediate reaction is positive or negative. Secondly, it would seem helpful to intelligently qualify any written or spoken philosophical or doctrinal

4. Klausner and Kuntz, *Philosophy: The Study of Alternate Beliefs* (Macmillan Press, 1961).

position. This suggests the honest proving of beliefs to ascertain the facets of truth that are really congruous with a philosophy of the Christian Revelation. Finally, it would seem important to attempt to relate the new concept to the total of past and present thought and life. Many have given fair, honest and intelligent qualifications of Bishop Robinson's point of view, but the final concern is the question of relevance. In the light of the history of man's thought and action, does Robinson give constructive suggestions or simply confound our confusion? In an age which is inflamed by fiction, the entertainment world and the communication media, is Robinson's contribution a creative, constructive one or does it add to the difficulties of those who would attempt to give guidance to youth who already are inclined to experiment with the Commandments?

Is one truly relevant who cleverly ascertains the trends of the statistical majority of any age and joins heartily in support of the views that will give him the vote and sales for his book? To be completely relevant, one must objectively consider the next step in this dialogue. What will neo-Robinsonism present? Perhaps even Bishop Robinson will live to blush at the next level in the philosophical and ethical application of his fundamental assumptions.

The quest for objectivity, then, must continue but must be based not on an exclusive philosophy of dogmatic empirical science but begin with the humility of human admission that social, intellectual, and religious influences have contributed to our present judgments. Scientists, mathematicians, and religionists can contribute together in this honest respectful quest for truth, for objectivity in truth and evangelical Christians, even though a minority voice, will ask to be heard in intellectual circles concerning their right to believe in objective truths based upon the Christian Revelation.