THE PRIMAL CERTAINTY

Introduction. Certainty is a subject which is notorious for giving rise to conflicting claims, and this is why it deserves the trouble of seeking the reasons why it should do so. For this purpose, I shall focus on the ancient form of the *Cogito* argument as given by Saint Augustine, and explore its content in the light of what Proclus says about the soul in his book *The Elements of Theology.* This rather unusual pairing is owing to ideas about the self on which Proclus and Augustine are agreed, which I hope will become clear.

To say that certainty exists need not mean anything more than to say that knowledge exists, although the word knowledge applies to countless things which are arrived at with many different degrees of directness and clarity. Yet, strictly speaking, we cannot speak of one thing being more certain than another, as it would be like saying that something was “more unique.” Nevertheless, that still leaves a place for a certainty which can serve as a standard for all others by reason of its special directness and the transparency of its subject matter.

An ideal example of certainty is needed because many supposed certainties can give rise to arguments for reasons which neither side is clear about. The root of this problem is the fact that certainty belongs in both objective and subjective realms, while all too often it is not found to be in both equally. There are objective certainties which one cannot make certain for oneself, and subjective ones which either fail the test of objectivity or cannot be proved adequate to it. For example, Einstein’s $E = mc^2$ is a certainty, but I cannot prove it myself; at the same time, I am subjectively

certain that Platonism is the best kind of philosophy, even though there will be others who say they are certain that it is not.

These facts give a good indication as to where we must look for the ideal standard of certainty: it must first of all be both objective and subjective equally. This balance is necessary, but still not sufficient, however, because it is to be found even in two twos are four, and in any number of other arithmetical relations. Besides this, we must remember that the numbers have a position intermediate between the Forms and their instantiations, whereas certainty can only be fully universal on the level of the Forms, i.e. the highest level of cognition.

Numbers have besides, a certain lack of immediacy, because they require inference, as do material objects. Pure certainty would therefore require the additional criteria of universality and immediacy, besides the balance of subjectivity and objectivity, and this combination points inevitably to the self. For the present purpose, by “self” I mean the soul in its capacity as agent, or source of volition. Though there are certainties which are considered more important or richer in content - most obviously God - they will not be sufficient in all four criteria, as, for example, the certainty of God is primarily in the objective dimension, not the subjective, and is for us also lacking in the criterion of directness.

I therefore propose to examine the ideal standard of certainty subject to these conditions, so that by doing so we may gain some more insight into the nature of the self, or rather, the common nature of all selves.

Self-Reflection. The original form of the *Cogito* argument was that of Saint Augustine, and for him, the main issue was the mind's certainty of itself in the face of any amount of deception in the outside world. If I am deceived, I know that I do not want to be deceived; if I thought there was no truth, I would be claiming that I knew a truth. Truth would remain, even if the world were destroyed, because it would be true that the world had ceased to exist. The act of self-reflection transcends all phenomena, and guarantees one's grasp of truth.

This involves a property of the rational soul which has been closely studied by Proclus, as can be seen in the way he treats the relevant properties of the soul in *The Elements of Theology.* This is where he says that the soul is "converted to itself" or "reverts upon itself." What he says about this is relevant to the *Cogito* argument, even though he does not use it for that purpose. This power of complete self-relation appears as an essential property of the soul (see E.T. props. 15-16). It gives a way of proving that the mind is both incorporeal and separable from the body, and accordingly it is shown that the whole mind is "converted" to the whole mind, with no separation of parts. Where I speak of "mind," it is to denote the soul as possessor and user of intelligence. (Its property of self-conversion is besides linked to the soul's power of self-motion, as they have the same basis,E.T. prop.17). Its separability which follows from its self-conversion is therefore just as characteristic of the rational mind as the possession of reason itself.

The function of conversion or reversion can be expressed by saying that the mind can divide and reunite itself without either disruption or confusion, because its possibilities of division and combination greatly

exceed those of material things. Material objects can be divided, only to make them into mutually-exclusive pieces, and they can only be combined at the price of losing their separate identities. This underlines the fact that material things can only interact through superficial parts, while the rest are not involved.

The mind’s self-conversive act is never communicated to its body, since the body can neither share this function nor prevent it, even though it may hinder it, as when it allows an excess of sense-perception over thought. Unlike the other faculties, the intellective act is in no way dependent on the body, even where the senses provide occasional causes for it.

Proclus further supports this separable view of body and soul with an argument from the distinction between being or essential nature and its activity. The activity is clearly dependent and derivative in relation to the being which exerts the activity, and on this basis, what has been said as to the independence of the mind’s *activity* from the body must apply *a fortiori* to the substance of the mind or soul itself. This is a substance which could be said to exist separately from its body even more readily than its self-reflective power could.

There is nothing accidental about the relation of body and soul, however, firstly because they are related in the manner of Form and instantiation, and secondly because they are adjacent members of a universal

hierarchy of being which Proclus summarises as follows:

"Beyond all bodies is the soul's essence; beyond all souls, the intellective principle; and beyond all intellective substances, the One." (E.T. prop.20)

Knowledge and Representation. In this hierarchical structure of being, every intelligence is said to know not only itself but also the beings superior to itself and those that are inferior, even though this cannot be in the same mode for each of these three cases. Thus, things subordinate by nature to mind, that is, objects in the sense world, are not known as they are in themselves because the mind, it is said, "can only know the impress produced upon it by the object. For it knows its own, not the alien." (E.T. prop.167)* We know our *experience* of a material world, but not that world as such. This is also summed up by the dictum that the known is always according to the nature of the knower. (It is said that lions think that lion-tamers are also lions).

Such considerations show that in antiquity the idea that knowledge of the external world was by means of individual representations existed along with the theory of Forms, so as to comprehend the difference between the way in which instantiations of Forms must be known and the way in which the Forms are known. While sense-objects are instantiations of Forms, the mind's representation of them takes them a stage further from their Forms. They

* Thomas Taylor: "But it will only know the image of this thing as being generated in itself from it. For it knows that which it possesses, and the manner in which it is affected, but not that which it does not possess . . ."

are thus doubly derivative, and this is a further reason to doubt the truth-value of what comes to us from sense perception alone, in addition to the reason given by Plato, the fact that these things are in continual change.

But while knowledge of the external world is by representation, knowledge of the Forms is immediate, whether it is recognised as such or not, in which case it is exempt from the inward peculiarities of different minds. This makes it self-transcending, or rather ego-transcending, in addition to its freedom from the confusions and approximations of the sense world. This innate and universal knowledge includes a knowledge of higher modes of being, and accordingly, Proclus affirms that the mind can know what is above its own level through knowing itself. Here, self-reflection is the basis of what is known beyond the self. (E.T. prop. 167)

Soul's Internal Relations. It should be noted that this self-certainty in the soul must not be confused with the necessity of its own existence, because all degrees of being below the highest can be conceived as not existing or as not having been caused.

The mind sees itself as a cause which is also an effect derived from the Supreme Being. As such, it cannot be self-existent, but being caused, it has a derivative necessity-of-being, or it would not be immortal.*

Since the mind knows itself, its own intelligence must be an intelligible object for itself. (E.T. props. 168

* Divine Being: complete necessity; souls: conditional necessity; material objects: complete contingency.

and 169). This involves a union of an intelligence with an intelligible object, in a unique case where the two are interchangeable, so that one could say, in Proclus' words, that in the soul "there is an intelligible in the Intelligence and an intelligence in the Intelligible", (prop.167)* and this in a situation where either can be substituted for the other.

This is why the finite mind can only be strictly identical with its own content and not with what it knows of any other kind of being; its knowledge of higher and lower beings requires representative ideas of them. The higher beings differ from our ideas of them, not so much in regard to their attributes, but in regard to their separate substances. The mind which knows them knows their attributes more or less adequately because they have their equivalents among its own range of innate ideas.

Such ideas as to the mind's self-knowledge imply that in this act it knows both *what* it knows and *that* it knows, knowing itself as both substance and attributes. Given this identity of knower and known, there is an act-of-knowing which is a property of both of them. (E.T.prop.168). For Proclus, this means that "the intellective act is identical with the intellectual subject and the intelligible object. Being the intermediary between the

* Thomas Taylor: "hence in the intellect there is the intelligible, and in the intelligible, intellect. But one intellect is the same with the intelligible; and another is the same with the intelligible which is in itself, but is not the same with the intelligible prior to itself."

identical knower and known, it must be identical with both.” (E.T.169). There is thus a third principle involved here, making up the *knower*, the *known*, and the *act-of-knowing*, and two things, each of which is equal to a third one, must be equal to one another.

From this it follows that neither the I-subject nor the me-object can exist without the other, and neither is more real than the other. Neither of them is a substance, because they are both essential modes of *activity* in the soul, which is the true substance.

The Augustinian Cogito. Other implications of the triune nature of self-knowledge are drawn by Augustine from his own experience of it. From the soul’s internal relations as just analysed, he showed that the relations between Intelligible Object, Intellectual Subject, and Intellective Act are translatable as the relations between Being, Knowledge, and the Love of Being and Knowledge.* These relations had for him a clear relevance to the relations between the persons of the Trinity so that they confirmed the idea that the human soul was made in the image of the Trinity. (The body, as image or instantiation of the soul, would thus be an image of an image of God).

The human soul is understood to be among the order of spirits, and a classic definition of spirit is according to its activities, which are those of knowing, loving,

* Thomas Taylor: “Essence, Power and Energy.” (prop.169), or Dodds: “Existence, Potency, and Activity.” (prop.169).

and initiating action. (Substance as such has been defined as being-endued-with-the-power-of-action). From thence follows another ternary, this time of knowledge, love, and power, outside all spatial dimensions, and in this the soul's essence can be seen.

I have already referred to the fact that knowledge is according to the nature of the knower, and that this elevates the lower beings in our knowledge and lowers that of higher or divine beings. This is not to suggest that such instances of knowledge are not truly knowledge, only that they have a lack of directness, because of the inequalities between knower and known. Such knowledge therefore lacks the primal directness that one would require of a paradigm case of knowledge.

For this reason, Augustine set aside these unequal cases of knowledge and decided on the middle ground, where the mind knows itself and verifies, or approves of, the known: (I quote) "This same knowledge is in such way its *word* (i.e. its *Form*), that it is wholly and entirely on a par with it, is equal to, and is identical with it, because it is not the knowledge of a lower essence such as the body, nor of a higher essence, such as God." (*The Trinity,* Bk.IX, Ch.11)

Thus the parity and congruence between knower and known is complete, and this is what entitles it to be taken as a paradigm of knowledge, and therefore of certainty. As Augustine puts it, "every mind knows and is certain concerning itself" (ibid.).

Compared with this, the existence of one's own body, or of anything else in the external world, depends on inference, and no matter how frequently the inference is made, repetition cannot make it anything other than inference. Inferences vary greatly in point of rigour, and thus error arises where external things are explained on inadequate evidence or with defective reasoning. There is besides the ever-present possibility of failing to recognise a Form in one of its material instantiations in the world. No such hazards can ever enter into the function of essential self-relation.

The mind's self-evidence to itself was shown by Augustine to have consequences which included life and existence as well as knowledge, because it is certain that no one *understands* who does not *live*, and that no one *lives* who *is not*. Thus the *Cogito* extends to the existence of the thinker, but in a more effective way than in the formula of Descartes. For Descartes, the "I" does not denote a substance, but is only a collective term for the sum of its thoughts.

In the relation between existence, life, and knowledge, we can see another ternary, which has been called that of the three universal miracles. They bear the stamp of the absolute, as can be seen in the way the least existent transcends nothing, while life transcends it similarly, and so likewise does knowledge.

Along with life and existence, the will and the memory are bases for certainties which arise within the soul,

and they give rise to a series of secondary certainties. One must exist and live in order to doubt or be deceived, in which case there can be no such thing as complete deception or doubt. The self-reflective property of the mind also means that numerous true statements can be drawn from its own operations, as I have said, for example, where we know *that* we know something, as soon as we know it. Here is the basis for our ability to pronounce *a priori* truths, and therefore for the whole of metaphysical knowledge.

To conclude, not merely do we have an ideal pattern or paradigm case of certainty, which results from some essential properties of the self, but we have here the intellectual function on which metaphysical philosophy depends. The fact that it does not depend on sense-perception means that its validation comes from within the mind and therefore does not take place in the external world. Here is the cause of the head-on opposition between metaphysical thought and the empiricistic thought of modernity and all forms of thought which deny the transcendental nature of the self.

Appearance and Reality. This subject of the self and its certainty is highly relevant to that of appearance and reality, i.e. the distinction between full realities and defective manifestations of them. This is because the function of the self’s certainty places it in the realm of reality, even though it is naturally manifest in a realm where many things are a matter of appearance.

Such a case where appearance and reality are united is significant in relation to metaphysics, because the main reason for metaphysics is the need to distinguish between the real and the illusory, and to give an account of what lies behind the things which deceive us. Against this, anti-metaphysical thought seeks to make everything real, while some kinds of metaphysical thought go to the opposite extreme of enlarging the realm of appearance until it engulfs even the self on whose operation it depends. Curiously enough, science deals with the self in the same way.

These two extremes have a certain affinity, simply from being extremes, as well as from their common denial of any interaction between the real and the apparent. In doing this, they ignore the hierarchy of being, which consists in a downward distribution of reality from the Highest, through innumerable degrees of being. Platonism is committed by its very nature to the separation of appearance and reality, which arises in its most universal form as the distinction between the realms of the Forms and their instantiations. The determination of truth in all fields is the work of the individual consciousness, and its certainty concerning itself is the guarantee of the validity of all its operations in philosophy, theology and science.

CONCLUSION FOR ‘THE PRIMAL CERTAINTY.’

What has been argued here concerning the self and self-reflection is at the same time a refutation of the main premise of all anti-personalist thought, namely, that the individual self is simply a natural phenomenon, and

nothing more. The falsehood of that premise appears in the known properties of the self which have no equivalents in nature, where these include its power of self-reflection. It is at the same time, a concise summary of my own personalist position.

These ideas concerning the self should be taken together with what is concluded in Ch.2 of *Self and Spirit*, where the soul's power of forming a representation of the world is as supernatural as the self-reflective power discussed in the above. The idea of the individual self reached in *Self and Spirit* adds another dimension to ideas of the self as both an individual Form and an agent of self-aware concsciousness.