

## TRUTH AND THE SOCRATIC PARADOX

***An Argument for Relativity.*** While writing about different kinds of lies, Augustine held an atypically sceptical position with regard to truth which makes it harder to identify the opponents of truth. To begin with, there is the generally accepted principle that we are all motivated by good things, not by bad, even though the bad are necessary for some purposes. Of course a criminal wills the possession of a large sum of money for its own sake, but in order to get it he must will the violence or treachery necessary for that. The fact that the violence or fraud were not valued for themselves does not take anything from the guilt of committing them. This is a case of things which are separate for our thoughts but not separate in physical fact. Thus despite the distinction between the means used and the object sought, these things are in reality fused in a single mixture, even though one ingredient is called "good" and the other "bad."

For Augustine, in the above essay, (As cited by H.G.Frankfurt in *On Bullshit*) truly culpable lying would be confined to cases where the lie was told purely for the sake of doing so, and not for any purpose external to it. But in this case, true lying would be pathological, or else a form of childhood behaviour on any natural basis. For all other cases, it would appear that true lying was not to be found anywhere. Besides, the same sophistical reasoning could be applied to most other forms of sin, e.g. theft, which could be called involuntary on the grounds that its real purpose is possession of the thing stolen. Rape could be said to be caused only by a desire for a sexual relationship, and not for raping as such. This kind of thinking would much reduce the seriousness of sin, which in fact Augustine did not try to do, let alone

trying to confine it to the insane or the demonic. Such thinking ignores the fact that all examples of sin involve breaking the Golden Rule, and that remains true regardless of alleged motives.

***The Foundation of Truth.*** Against the untruths of fantasy and false philosophy, there is always an awareness of an absolute limit as long as we are conscious at all. Behind all the fabrications and flights of fancy that the mind gives rise to is the uncreated, and it is soon reached, in the form of the uncreatable and indestructible basis of truth. Augustine expressed this point by observing that if all truth were to be destroyed, it would still be true that it had been destroyed, whence the immovable bounds of consciousness:

"[W]e concluded that truth cannot perish because not only if the whole world perished, but even if truth itself perished, it would still be true that the world and truth perished. But nothing is true without truth. Therefore there is no way for truth to perish." (*Soliloquies* Bk.II, 28)

This is why knowledge of truth is involved with both objective reality and the immortality of the soul, which it sustains and brings into consciousness. The necessary awareness of the distinction between what is and what is not always underlies our conception of truth, as long as we are conscious at all. However, no one can say what consciousness is, or has ever been reputed to do so, and that points to the conclusion that consciousness comes to our minds from somewhere else higher than ourselves in the order of being. Besides that, if consciousness originated in our minds, it would not be possible for our minds to *lose consciousness*.

This is speaking loosely, since an absolute loss would leave nothing from whence consciousness could be reactivated, but nevertheless we experience a great variation in the degree and amplitude of consciousness which we have at any given time. Again, this would not be so if our minds were the source of their own consciousness, whereas in practice we regularly feel it to increase from zero and to return to it later, whether we will or not.

These considerations point to the idea that our minds are created; in contrast with the above, to be intrinsically conscious and to know what consciousness is in itself would be characteristics of Divinity. Our nearest approach to that is in our universal awareness of truths which cannot be created or destroyed, and which have a central place in all thought. They can only be learned and passed on to others whose minds can benefit from them, and here we can see the basis of Tradition, as opposed to any number of things called "traditions." The two main enemies of Tradition are popular materialism and the belief in progress derived from Darwinism, with their pretence of going beyond all barriers. Indestructible and irreducible issues, instead of being accepted by most modern philosophy as the universal infrastructure of the knowable, are taken for mere flaws in our knowledge, subject to future enlightenment, ignoring the fact that where there is no fixity, there can be no knowledge. The effect of endless flux would be the same as that of endless paralysis. Truth is that which does not change, over against the changing.

***An Objection to Materialism.*** This is why Platonic philosophy, with the eternal Forms, is specially able to counter materialism, while the belief in invariable

progress in all realms can be counteracted by the universal idea of cosmic time as being subject to cyclic laws. Materialism is more a mental habit than a philosophy, and this can easily be confirmed by asking what would result if we really were robots controlled by nothing more than natural forces: if that was true, there could be no "what if." There would be nothing about us to be decided. To choose to be materialists, we would have to assign a robotic role to ourselves, but that requires an inner freedom which materialism rules out; it knows no choices, only brute facts. The Platonic conception of the prime realities as Souls and Forms, with matter a reality peripheral to them, is as if designed to exclude materialism from the start. If we were the kind of being which materialism envisages, it would be impossible to explain how we knew it, since that could only come from an act of self-reflection, that being impossible in a materialistic world. Materialism as a philosophy is thus self-contradictory, but that leaves it free to be a means of explaining other people, and other cultures, when debate has been taken over by the sub-rational.

The Paradox of persons who "know everything": there is an uncritical common sense thinking which supports a practical materialism, for those who are unconscious of the Socratic paradox that man must first know that he does not know before the philosophic quest can begin. Those who "know everything" (in their own minds) organize their lives such that nothing outside their circle of conventional realities need be examined when it is in step with the minds of a majority. Knowledge can be shared on this basis provided that it is relative to things which are peripheral to the

knower and do not apply to the knower himself. When nothing outside this circle of token realities needs to be considered, the result is the Socratic ignorance. (Socrates professed to know "nothing" so that others would have to explain what they meant when they claimed knowledge. Paradoxically, had he really known nothing, he would have been content with whatever people told him, but by his "knowing nothing" he put himself outside the social conventions of recognised truth.

***The Socratic Paradox.*** One may then feel personally responsible for the truth of things one holds to be true, instead of relying on what other people think, even though this can appear anti-social. But the implied criticism of others is no more severe than it is towards oneself. This contrasts with the countless cases where one only believes something because one has heard that others do. In modern secular society, this tendency is specially rampant. This is where one finds those who are blind to the Socratic Paradox, not the paradox whereby one cannot do anything which one believed to be wrong, but blind to the sense of one's own deep ignorance. Such is the person who "knows everything," despite the absurdity it involves. Here, the unknown is equated with items of as yet undiscovered information, which are in the same class with those already current.

To reject or ignore the Socratic Paradox and to avoid being existentially disturbed by it, is to take as masters or leaders persons whose intellectual level is no higher than one's own, or inferior to it. The stupidity in this is ignored because of a desire to enlarge one's own role in

society, regardless of its value. This is supported by false logic: to think the same as other people has something in common with the case where everyone really does know the same truth, e.g. two times two make four. In such cases there is bound to be agreement among all concerned, and this can be foolishly reversed to mean that when there is widespread agreement about anything, the thing agreed upon must be true. On the contrary, general agreement can be caused by a multitude of things other than the known truth. This is comparable to the excuse for rule-breaking that "everybody does it."

Philosophy suffers from the disadvantage that virtues of the mind usually go unrecognized, as though excellence was reserved for speech and behaviour. This is because misbehaviour in speech and action lead to reactions which usually occur quickly, whereas those of the mind appear to have no effect because of their slowness. Nevertheless, disregard for the virtues of the mind leads to an undramatic kind of danger, like the possibility of wasting one's life. Nevertheless, minds which are awakened to their negative condition feel driven to seek contact with minds superior to themselves and which have escaped the usual limitations. By sharing in the thought of greater and more enlightened minds, an individual can disperse "the anaesthetic fog called nature, or the real world," as C.S. Lewis put it, adding that this kind of fog was dissolved by death, when "the Presence in which you have always stood becomes palpable, immediate, and unavoidable." Thus both death and philosophy bring about the same sort of thing, which is no doubt why Plato in the *Phaedo* called philosophy

"a practice of death and dying." The contrary state, which has no awareness of this need, has elsewhere been called "going to sleep in Hades."

These things have been observed many times before, but they must always be recalled when tradition and authenticity of mind are the issue. Besides, the world of the "Socratically ignorant" which "knows everything" is always vulnerable, despite its social dominance, because at any time real knowledge can emerge and displace the clever toys that knowledge was supposed to exist for. The production of general agreement in this sphere cannot be secured by logic, but only by the imposition of conformity, whence it is really a social artefact with no meaning in depth. But why is this uniformity sought at all? One must believe that there is such a thing as truth, no matter how little care has been taken to ascertain it. Such conventionalist thought is liable to be contradicted by any philosophy which can claim to transcend the appearances of things and find the reality which underlies them.

***Centrality the Position of the Knower.*** Here is the conflict with inauthentic thought, which always assumes that appearance and reality must be one and the same. Linguistic philosophy actually asserts and defends this supposed identity, and that marks it as an anti-philosophy. The supposed identity of appearance and reality offers a position of maximum simplicity, and it works psychologically so well that most people cannot be happy without it, and their imaginations are constricted accordingly. The fact that the darker side of life always

reasserts itself sooner or later is not enough to banish the mindset in question, such is the desire for simplicity at any price, when "knowing everything" can be taken for a reality, effectively excluding any thought of the Socratic Paradox. This creates a sense of one's centrality in the world which neutralises the effects of the smallness of the physical self in relation to its world in a way which supports the inauthentic view of it.

This subjective centrality has an affinity with the authentic centrality of the Microcosm, which it is usually unable to recognise. Scepticism about the Microcosm is owing to a materialistic view of the person which takes it to be primarily the body and the body's functions and activities. On this basis, it is obvious that no one can see a Macrocosmic pattern whose every attribute is an archetypal pattern for all human activities. The Macrocosm as known to science, on the contrary, shows no manifestation of anything we would call human. Such is the view of the self and its world on a materialistic basis. To be a microcosm is by definition to be a microcosm of something, and what could that be? This problem is insoluble as long as we see our own bodily lives as an independent reality in a different category from that of all our experiences of the world in general.

In fact there is no logical justification for putting the body in a different category like this, because there is no reason why our bodily lives should be thus separated from the rest of nature. The existence of one's body is not a primal reality because it is an *inference* made by the mind;



it does not speak for itself. The fact that the inference in question is made a thousand times a day does not make it any less an inference. Non-human natural realities are only put in a separate category from the body by materialists because they do not obey our wills, hopes, and desires, and this is simply owing to self-interest, not to philosophy, let alone reality as such. A correct treatment of our physical life in the physical world would be to combine them in a single system, free from psychological factors. In this case, the fundamental reality would be that of ideas and perceptions, which must be our primary realities, and not selections of inferences.

This position excludes that of materialism, because in this case there are no self-existent material things, but rather our *experiences* of material things, and experiences as such are not material. Here are two divergent positions, one of which is part of untrained common sense, the other being the result of thought which does not stop at the appearances of things. In this connection, Berkeley gives an account of Proclus' view of this as follows:

"There are two sorts of philosophers. The one placed body first in the order of beings, and made the faculty of thinking depend thereupon, supposing that the principles of all things are corporeal: that body most really or principally exists, and all other things in a secondary sense, and by virtue of that. Others, making all corporeal things to be dependent on soul or mind, think this to exist in the first place and primary sense, and the being of bodies to be altogether derived from, and presuppose that of the mind." (Berkeley, *Siris*, 263-264, p.126)

***The Source of Experience.*** We know by experience that the existence of ideas in the mind is unmediated, whereas the knowledge of one's body, and bodies of any kind, is always by inference or deduction, no matter how often the inference is made. But this leads to the illusion that the inferred is primal and unmediated. That position is wholly the result of psychological factors. In reality, each self or centre of experience is a centre just like all other selves, and they each contain a selection of cosmic contents, selected according to its unique individuality, and so manifesting its individuality.

So conceived, each self is indeed a microcosm, and when it is asked what it is a microcosm of, the answer is the whole cosmic reality which is represented in each person, each representing the Macrocosm from its own point of view. The bodily self is just one part of the cosmic reality as a whole, and is in no way the counterpart of any other reality. The common sense idea of the body as transcending all other objects of sense and as taking them all into its consciousness arises from a complex of purely personal concerns and interests, involving our hopes and fears, desires and aversions, and these things are no basis for a philosophical position. Nevertheless, it has a defining role in materialism, one which explains the hold which it has on human consciousness.

If the body is not the source of its ideas and perceptions, but is only included among them, it is because the soul is their true source. The soul is the Form of the

body, whence it knows the determinations of the body from the inside, so to speak.

This conclusion, that the body is in no way the source of its ideas and perceptions, can easily be misunderstood, because it may appear that we should be able to ignore the location of our embodied selves and their relations to other sensible entities. Since the soul is the true source of consciousness, the nature of perception is to draw the multiple world of objects into a single centre. Thus every perception of the external world must put the percipient at the centre of his perceived world. No one believes that this means that the self really is the centre of the world, because centrality is the price of perception in the form of world-representation. On this basis, one's body is simply the inmost zone of one's total field of perception, and its centrality causes it be taken for the *source* of perceptions. This centrality has unwanted side-effects, notably the illusion of "knowing everything," when the "everything" consists only of a knowledge of external conditions among objects in the world.

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