

Epistemological Considerations on Dogmatic Statements

In the Church today there is a healthy and promising theological pluralism that has brought into focus aspects of the Christian faith inadequately perceived and considered till now; the phenomenon of religious ferment has allowed philosophers of religion tremendous opportunity to reflect more comprehensively and critically on the nature of belief and on man, the believer. With this paper I wish to contribute to the current debate on the epistemology of dogmatic formulations. This is, understandably, not a new ground but it continues to challenge phenomenologists and philosophers of religion. Assuming the possibility of dogmatic statements (defined propositions), what is their epistemological status? Quite obviously, the philosopher is not called upon to make faith-commitments; adverting to what the believer (in our study, the Christian) holds to be a dogmatic proposition of his faith, the philosopher can inquire on its epistemic structure.

The problematic of my paper is introduced by Hans Kung in his widely-commented discussion on the infallibility of dogmatic propositions.

Articles of faith are propositions. Formulas of faith, professions of faith, and definitions of faith are propositions — simple or complex — and are not *a priori* free from the laws that govern propositions. Nor are propositions of faith ever directly God's word, but at best God's word at-

tested and mediated by man's word: perceptible and transmissible by human propositions.¹

I will argue in this paper for an epistemology of dogmatic statements that recognizes the difference between insight and conceptual scheme. I find inspiration in phenomenological studies that indicate a level of knowing anterior (not necessarily chronologically) to conceptualization. This has been referred to as "prepredicative knowledge" or "prelogical knowledge" to differentiate it from "predicative", or "conceptual" knowledge.

Again, Kung indicates this dialectic tension in his brief remarks on the inadequacy of propositions: Propositions fall short of reality because there always remains a difference between what I want to state and what I do state, between my intention and my spoken word.² I will try to show that since the pre-predicative — predicative scheme constitutes the gnoseological structure of man (the knowing of man) then the remarks made in reference to dogmatic statements also describe the situation in other aspects of human understanding. I will not pursue my discussion on the grounds of linguistic philosophy (which is what Kung somehow does) although I very well realize the premises that such a prospect holds out. I will concern myself with investigating the basic structure of knowing that leads to the formulation of a dogmatic statement or a conceptual scheme.

More specifically, I want to propose an epistemological scheme that explains why dogmatic statements, though dynamic (in the sense of changeable) express an immutable truth. In this regard it is instructive to refer to Rahner for whom dogmatic evolution does not mean a change in the divine reality nor the falsification of a proposition formerly taken to be true but a shift or an amplification of the perspective from which man views reality.³

I. *The Problem in Context*

The problem I have proposed for study has different areas of speculation. When knowledge was conceived of as a matter of

¹ Hans Kung, *Infalible? An Inquiry*. (Image Books, 1972), p. 141.

² *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³ Karl Rahner, "Sobre el problema de la evolucion del dogma" *Escritos de Teologia*, I. (Taurus Ediciones, 1963), p. 57.

capturing in the intellect something determined and fixed in the extramental world there were no problems with the notion of *absolute truth*. "Adequatio intellectus et rei" could be understood as its criterion in the sense that when one judged exactly as things were then one's judgments were "absolutely true".⁴ However, from reflection on man's unchanging essence reflection focused itself on historicity and dynamism and Protagoras drew contemporary attention. Relativism no longer sounded as threatening. But philosophy had, and does have to plot the delicate course between relativism and dogmatism.⁵ In the wake of this epistemological ambiguity some propose to accept something like a polyvalent "rationality". Hiley cites Jarvie, Agassi and Fales who argue for a weak sense of rationality which would be characterized by a series of beliefs which fail to accomodate preponderant evidence concerning the nature of the world. It is rational by a pragmatic criterion of truth since the system produces appropriately socialized behavior. Strongly rational belief, on the other hand, is that which accomodates the preponderant evidence.⁶ I will not digress into a discussion over the merits of this proposal. It does show, however, that the choices left us are to deny any qualitative mutability of human knowledge and this would, to my mind, be dogmatism or to advocate the relativism that makes it extremely difficult to fix any meaning to "truth" because of its insistence that what might have been "true" for Ptolemy although empirically determined to be false today is really true. Rather than join the debate between dogmatism and relativism, however, I like to suggest that the tension between the definitiveness of a dogma and its mutability as a proposition (as a conceptual formulation) is related to the problem of allowing for a "historicity"

⁴ I have no intentions of calling into question what has been known as the "correspondence theory". I think that the correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth need not be mutually exclusive and do have spheres of applicability. That a triangle can have two parallel sides is "true" since it is coherent with other axioms and postulates of a non-Euclidean geometry. The *Tarski* formulation "The strawberry is red" is true when the strawberry is really red, cannot avoid a reference to the "real". Also to be considered is the peculiarity of a credal statement. What makes for the truth of a "protocol statement" (Pedro is at the door) cannot be unhesitatingly applied to credal statements.

⁵ cf. David Hiley, "Relativism, Dogmatism and Rationality" *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, No. 2, 133-149.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

of truth that nevertheless leaves the meaning of "truth" reasonably clear.

"Man is a composite of matter and a rational soul". A few philosophers would outrightly dismiss the statement as false. More, I believe, would be interested in finding out what Aristotle and the Scholastics meant. Obviously it will not do to define "matter" and "rational soul" in order to clarify the scheme: composite of matter and a rational soul. This suggests that some kind of a "hermeneutic" (I do not associate myself with Gadamer nor with any school of "hermeneutics") is called for. To demand a hermeneutic of such a philosophical proposition is to recognize that a distinction exists between the insight or the truth about man that the concepts embody and the conceptual framework it is conveyed in. In short; using the hylomorphic framework of matter and form, Aristotle and the Scholastics in his train said something about man. What was their insight?

It might, perhaps, be remarked that the distinction between "insight" and "conceptual framework" is the introduction of dualism in depicting the gnoseological structure of man. I do not see why we should instantaneously react against dualism. The alternative to recognizing differences is reductionism which is as dangerous a possibility as an artificial bifurcation of primitive or existential unity.

We might put it in another way, more on the side of the philosophy of language: "body and soul" belongs to a linguistic structuration of experience. Thought is structured by language.

As the words themselves are laden with meaning we take up someone else's thought *in* and *through* his speech. The act of communication is itself a sort of encroachment by one embodied and speaking being upon another, '*making* the other speak, *think*, and become what he never would have been by himself'. The yet unthematized signification erupts from within one field of personal existence into the word and through the word irrups into someone else's world.⁷

⁷ Margaret Urban Coyne, "Merleau-Ponty on Language: An Interrupted Journey Toward a Phenomenology of Speaking" *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XX, No. 3, 307-326.
The challenge to justify rationality, as Hiley shows, is artificial. By seeking a justification for rationality one is being rational, otherwise a "blind leap" would do.

Seen this way, it is, in principle, possible to linguistically/conceptually thematize signification in an alternative way. This will not only be a case of using "new words" to say the same things but of seeing things differently *because* of the "new words".

The controversy over Kant's "pure conceptions" beclouded his vital contribution to the discussion on conceptualization. Intuition submits itself to the structuring function of the categories of pure reason which are brought to light by transcendental logic. He could then say with reason that things are understood because they submit themselves to reason.⁸ Phenomenology has somehow balanced the place of eminence given to conceptualization in epistemology by calling attention to man's being-in-the-world as "lumen naturale". Being is unveiled, withdrawn from concealedness by man's conscious presence. Being-man, as being-conscious, is therefore being unveiled and being unveiling.⁹ I therefore see the problematic of *insight-conceptual scheme* trace its roots to the relation between *intuition* and *concept*, where I take intuition to be more than the "data" of the senses. What classical epistemologies have shown us is that concepts are meaningful: it is *not* reasonable to conclude, however, that meaning is to be found only in conceptualization, or in conceptualization, primarily. Phenomenology has, I think, convincingly brought into focus the birth of meaning in the intercourse between man and the world, in the interpretative and unveiling, conscious presence of man.

Of utmost relevance to our present considerations are *first*, that our concepts together constitute a coherent, interpretative scheme, and *second*, that these schemes are dynamic and belong to a historical context. I admit that in some concepts such as "triangle" pertinence to a particular scheme and historical conditioning may not seem so evident, but there are clear and enough cases that evidence the claims just made. I think that *a priori* the first and the second claims also follow from the fact that man's human existence is possible only when he understands with a certain degree of coherence in his concepts, when he sees the world as an organized whole somehow, and from the fact of human historicity.

⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason, Transcendental Logic* Bk. I, Ch. 1, Sec. 1, N. 4.

⁹ William Luijpen, *Existential Phenomenology* (Duquesne University Press, 1960), pp. 143-144.

II. *Conceptual Schemes and their Historicity*

By "conceptual scheme", I mean the body of concepts used generally (by a determinable population) at a given time in history. Says Kant, referring to his "table of categories":

For, that this table is useful in the theoretical part of philosophy, nay, indispensable for the sketching of the complete plan of a science, so far as that science rests upon conception *a priori*, and for dividing it mathematically, according to fixed principles is most manifest from the fact that it contains all the elementary conceptions of understanding, nay, even the form of a system of these in the understanding itself, and consequently indicates all the momenta, and also the internal arrangement of a projected speculative science, as I have elsewhere shown.¹⁰

Very like Aristotle (whose predicaments Kant thought to revise) Kant finds in his categories and in their four-fold classification the very outline (no doubt, timeless) of any systematic procedure. In other words, Kant understood his concepts (and concepts for that matter) to play an "ordering, schematizing" function with regard to human understanding. It is not necessary to revive the monumental question on the genesis of concepts or on the possibility of synthetic *a priori* knowledge and this to my mind, does not stand in the way of a full and serious appreciation of the order and coherence that Kant attributes to his concepts as schematizing understanding. The concepts themselves dictate the way science ought to proceed. The latter therefore owes its order to the systemic coherence of the concepts themselves. The Thomistic theory of abstraction presents a similar view. As a result of conceptual abstraction the quidity of a thing is unveiled and the intelligible species is created. It is this that makes science possible.¹¹

John Hick has been most instructive on this point. Our conscious experience, he asserts, is fundamentally consciousness of

¹⁰ Kant, *op. cit.*, Transcendental Logic, Bk. I., Ch. 1, Sec. 3 No. 7.

¹¹ *Summa Theologica* I, Q. 85, A. 1, and 2.

It would be interesting to pursue a hermeneutic of Thomas' "agent intellect". It is said to illuminate the phantasm, elevating it to the level of intelligibility, while it abstracts the intelligible species.

"significance" which means that for our consciousness, the world is "cosmos", an ordered, meaningful whole and not a kaleidoscope of wild, unrelated experiences.¹² It is because of significance that the universe, and things, are familiar and intelligible. Now, "significance" is a characteristic of the world in the face of consciousness; it is therefore a noematic attribute. Its noetic, or subjective counterpart is "interpretation", which is the attribution of significance or recognition and explanation. This being so, objects have significance for us only within a context of other significances, when they have a place in our interpretation of the world.¹³ Hick's example may well be a paradigm for subsequent discussion.

I see a rectangular red object on the floor in the corner. So far I have interpreted it as a "thing" (or "substance"), as something occupying space and time. On looking more closely, however, I see that it is a red-covered book. I have now made a new interpretation which includes my previous one but goes beyond it.¹⁴

I think we can now return to a consideration of the proposition. Man is a composite of body and soul. Thomas Aquinas' treatment of the matter is interesting. He starts with the experience of knowing as something distinct from the action of physical organs and yet pertaining to the same bodily being man. Therefore, he concludes, in man is an incorporeal and subsistent form called the human soul. I take this to mean then that Thomas *interprets* the experience of the distinctive quality of knowing as the "operation of the soul". "Body", "soul", "subsistent", "incorporeal" belong to one coherent interpretative scheme — that which Aristotle used to talk about things. It is not difficult then to think of the possibility of an alternate interpretative system (a conceptual scheme) that schematizes experience or intuition.

Another way of putting it, then is to say that there is no coincidence between insight and argument except probably in ma-

¹² John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Collins, 1957), pp. 98-103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

thematics and in logic.¹⁵ (The peculiarity of mathematical entities has been the subject of investigations even from antiquity.) The argument is the formalization, the schematization and the conceptualization of the insight and will always lie one step "after it". Furthermore, the intuition or the experience itself acts as the criterion for, or the check on, the interpretation.

Historicity is a second aspect of conceptual schemes relevant to my thesis. Lorraine Code pointedly argues for "historicism" for a theory of knowledge. Knowledge about the DNA molecule would be novel to such a degree that it could not have been assimilated within the body of 15th century biological knowledge.¹⁶ In short, "DNA" and all other concepts related to it were not within the interpretative system nor the range of 15th century biological thinking. But it is, today, which means that we perhaps play a different game governed by different rules. Similarly in the mechanical account of the universe of Newtonian physics the concepts of Einstein's relativity universe would have been unintelligible. The framework has shifted, and therefore has the perception.

Code, however, rightly warns us against envisioning a march towards the possession of absolute truth, i.e., the rendering of experience or insight in an eternal, conceptual scheme. It should be clear that the historicity of man stands in the way of such an aspiration. Neither should it be thought that one conceptual scheme is "just as good" as the other, that there is no qualitative change in understanding.

A body of knowledge (again either an ontogenetic or a phylogenetic sense) is a system of transformations becoming increasingly more adequate in its structuring of experience. Adequacy in this sense is assessed in terms of a capacity to deal with a wide range of experience at many different levels, together with a high degree of internal consistency.¹⁷

¹⁵ cf. Francis Gever's lecture notes on "Philosophical Anthropology" II (Maryhurst Seminary, Philippines). In Logic, for example, the inter-relatedness of $\neg(p \cdot q)$, $(\neg p \vee \neg q)$, $p \supset q$, $q \supset \neg \neg p$ is given by pursuing the rules replacement.

¹⁶ Lorraine Code, "The Importance of Historicism for a Theory of Knowledge," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 22 no. 2, 157-174.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

A "better" conceptual scheme is one that more adequately structures insight and experience. To return to our example from classical philosophical psychology: if other concepts have replaced the "body-soul" model of tradition, it need not be because "body-soul" is false but because more contemporary models endeavour to integrate and structure insights on man inadequately rendered by the "body-soul" interpretation. It is the function of hermeneutics to determine the insight formalized by the hylemorphic model. In fact, in the existentialist "being-in-the-world" the insight that man is a being who exhibits a continuity with the material universe as well as radical difference from it seems to be satisfactorily preserved, thought situated within a different frame.

Historicity, applied to epistemology, means that the necessary prerequisite modes of understanding which occasion the evolution of certain kinds of thinking and knowing evolve with time. It is the fundamental, prelogical and existential communion between man and being that provides the ground for gnoseological continuity; it is the evolution of logical patterns and concepts that marks discontinuity.

The rest of concepts that a community holds at a given evolutionary time operates, in the terms of Beatrice Bruteau, as a "psychic grid", screening the intercommunications that go to make our convictions about ourselves and the world.

Intelligibility implies relation to previously established conceptual structures. If we do not relate a new item in any way to our already established way of perceiving our environment, we will be literally unable to know it. This means that interpretation, or selection and organization, is always an integral part of the observation procedure itself. We establish a kind of "hermeneutic circle" in which interpretation is based on observation, but observation in turn is limited by the accepted interpretation.¹⁸

It is interesting that Code makes similar remarks:

The structuring which characterizes the knowing process takes place, as my discussion of Piaget suggests, in terms

¹⁸ Beatrice Bruteau, "The Psychi Grid: An Epistemological Model *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XX, No. 3, 279.

of cognitive structures which are functionally similar to categories, traditionally conceived. These act as a sort of filtering mechanism through which something objective passes on the way to becoming knowledge. It is in the filtering that subjective factors become evident: the manner of structuring varies historically, socially, culturally, ideologically or even personally.¹⁹

Thus if DNA was unintelligible to a 15th century biologist it was because microbiology and its structuration did not cohere with the then prevalent scheme. There is no basis for the conclusion, however that 15th century biology was false; its insights and encounters with objectivity (experience) have been integrated within the more comprehensive models of 20th century biology.

Is there room for objectivity in an epistemology that recognizes the structuring of insight/experience by conceptual models or interpretative schemes? In short are all models/interpretations possible? Already on a primitive level it is not difficult to see that objectivity is never lost. It certainly would not do to interpret that which we interpret today as a shovel as some kind of an eating instrument. Both the structure of the shovel and the structure of man will see to the frustration of such an interpretation. The same world imposes checks upon what can be observed and upon structuring. Obviously, various degrees of relativism obtain at various levels of knowing, which is not denying objectivity at all!

III. *An Epistemology of Dogmatic Formulations*

Let us suppose that my understanding of the development of the dogma on the hypostatic union in Jesus Christ is correct, then the following evolution may be traced:

Apostolic experience: Jesus, the man
 claimed a special relation with the
 Heavenly Father;
 indicated possession of a distinctive
 perception of things and of Values;

¹⁹ Code, *op. cit.*, 168.

Johannine model:	Jesus as <i>Logos</i>
Nicean-Chalcedonian model:	Jesus as <i>one substance</i> with the Father.
Scholastic model:	Jesus, hypostatically distinct from the Father with the human and divine natures united in a Divine hypostasis.

I propose that the defined dogmatic proposition is true if it faithfully conveys the faith-experience of the Church in Jesus Christ. That an evolution in conceptualization has taken place is beyond doubt. I do not think then that it should be objectionable to propose that the evolution in the structuration of the faith-experience continues. Nicea and Chalcedon do not become false. They remain definitive and determining for the faith-experience and credal insight which the "homousious" formula structured is the experience and faith of the Church. But I do not see what objection there can be to envisioning a more adequate conceptual scheme which may have little or no use for the Scholastic concepts of "hypostasis" and "substance" since these do not seem to be pertinent to a prevailing conception of the world and of human experience. In other words while the "psychic grid" of the last quarter of the 20th century may screen out "hypostasis" and "substance" the dogma binds because the insight of faith which was structured by the Scholastic system of substance and accident, essence, actus essendi and persona is the same insight of faith that our models today must schematize. Christian theology argues that the presence of the Spirit in a dynamic community, the Church, makes for the progressive development of insight on the same faith and a more comprehensive awareness of its dimensions. Granting this to be so, then epistemologically an alternate model is developed to structure the new levels of experience and of insight. For a theory of knowledge this is the importance of a new model — that it allows for a more comprehensive perception or structuration of experience and renders another perspective of reality.

Would heresy still be possible under the epistemological pattern I have just discussed? I do not have a fascination for tragedy but it should not be difficult to see that if Christianity wishes to

retain its right to make truth-claims, then error has to be a considered possibility. The faith-experience of man of which, in the Christian context, the Church is custodian is the check on conceptualization. Our grasp of the truth will always be inadequate because of the inevitable human perspective. I have also insisted that the experienced reality — objectivity — grounds the agent intellect and is the material for conceptual schematization. When this is not so, there is error.

Hans Kung describes the dilemma that can sometimes arise: while some are disgusted at having to mouth antiquated confessions of faith, others fear the suppression of the formulas in which they have always believed.¹⁸ I have shared with Kung that belief that *novelty* and *correctness* are not incompatible.

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²⁰ Hans Kung, *Existe Dios?* trans. J. Navalporto (Ediciones Cristianidad, 1979), p. 925.