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Empiricism

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Eliot went on to write profound religious verse, still in his trademark modernist style. 'Ash Wednesday' is about both personal repentance, and Christ as the still point of the turning world. (Russell Kirk quotes Eliot's contemporary Rose Macaulay to the effect that this poem turned many of the rising modernist generation to Christianity, instead of to *communism, suggesting that the poem had an impact as apologetics.)

Eliot wrote short poems on biblical subjects ('Journey of the Magi' and 'Simeon's Song') and religious dramas (*The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*). The major work of the latter part of his career was *The Four Quartets*, a difficult, challenging meditation on time and eternity, in which unconventional religious imagery breaks into a distinctly modern consciousness.

Eliot's brand of Christianity, an austere pessimistic strand described as the *via negativa*, was different in tone from the energetic, joyful version of C. S. *Lewis. The two men disliked each other's writing intensely and disagreed about literature on almost every point, though, as Lewis said, they agreed 'about matters of such moment [i.e. their Christian faith] that all literary questions are, by comparison, trivial'. (For an account of their ongoing feud, see Dale, *T. S. Eliot*, pp. 154–155.) The two perhaps represent two different ways of making historic Christianity credible to the contemporary *imagination, or perhaps ways of reaching two different kinds of personalities.

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G. E. VEITH

EMPIRICISM

Empiricism (from Gk *empeiria*, 'experience') is the important epistemological theory that all knowledge ultimately comes through experience. David *Hume (1711–76) wielded his

narrow (and unjustifiable) empiricism to the conclusion that human beings are not able to know about *causality, substance, minds or souls, *angels and God. Hume thought humans could not possibly perceive such things, and thus can never be said to know them.

How is one to respond to a narrow empiricist like Hume? One should begin by examining the grounds of the justification for Humean empiricism. One notes quickly that empiricism is not self-justifying in that it cannot validate its own use; for its success depends on certain human processes working together somehow to produce mostly true beliefs. But, as C. S. *Lewis argued, if our thoughts are just movements among the atoms in our brains, why think they are aimed at true belief? Experience as a source of knowledge is only as good as the accuracy and design structure of the mechanisms through which the experience occurs. If our cognitive structures arrived here only through the mechanisms of *naturalism and evolution, how could that causal story possibly account for our cognitive success? One could never erase the *doubt that one's mind was in error on any particular belief produced. But for a properly functioning person, experience does generate mostly true beliefs. The most plausible explanation for our cognitive success, therefore, is design imposed on us from outside. And so to justify empirical knowledge, it seems most plausible to approach empiricism from a theistic background.

It follows that non-theistic empiricisms must be carefully evaluated, for they usually overstep their bounds and propose self-defeating principles, or cannot account for the meaningful knowledge we do have. So, W. K. Clifford (nineteenth century) recommended that no-one should ever believe anything not supported by sufficient evidence (experience). Let us call this principle 'E'. What is the sufficient evidence for E? There cannot be sufficient evidence for E. Thus, it is a philosophical statement going beyond all available evidence. On Clifford's empiricism alone, E is self-defeating (it does not meet its own standard). The downfall of twentieth-century logical positivism (empiricism) hinged on the same self-defeating quality. British positivist A. J. Ayer maintained that a statement is meaningful if, and only if, the statement is analytic (true by definition alone, like 'all black dogs are black') or able to be verified through sense experience. Let us call this principle 'F'. Is F analytically true? No. Is F

able to be verified through sense experience? No. Thus, F is self-defeating and steps beyond its bounds unjustifiably. Ayer tried to patch up principle F, leading him to an anaemic empiricism that left out as meaningless some things we know to be meaningful, e.g. general propositions in *science, like 'all ravens are black', and unrepeatably historical truths.

Among Christian apologists the use of experience to justify theistic belief is common, but the types of justification, and where and when justification takes place within an apologetic system, vary. Evidentialists believe the truth of Christianity can be established through the systemization of evidences about the universe, *morality, consciousness, rationality, design, probabilities for life, and Jesus's life, death and resurrection. Evidentialists like Montgomery, McDowell and Habermas argue that if one applies generally accepted principles of historiography and textual criticism to the available evidences, one will find the weight of probability squarely on the side of Christian truth. Presuppositionalists like Van Til are much more concerned with identifying the basis or conditions for making sense of experience before one ever asks where the evidences themselves point regarding Christianity.

A highly significant modern argument for God's existence hinges on the cognitive success of our rationality and our belief-forming mechanisms. How is it that our beliefs picture the world rightly, i.e. that our subjective formation of beliefs usually conforms correctly and accurately with our objective presence in this world? C. S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga have powerfully argued that *naturalism (the belief that nature is all there is, thus implying evolution is entirely responsible for our cognitive apparatus) is not in itself sufficient to explain the success of the human cognitive enterprise. As Lewis said, the naturalist finds himself hoisted on his own petard: in the very act of explaining that thought is no more than movements among the 'grey matter', he must rely on the orderliness and purposiveness of thought patterns that are clearly aimed at *truth. The naturalist can only say that through time, chance, random mutations and natural selection alone such wonderful structures have been formed and are aimed, somehow, at producing true beliefs. But on naturalism and evolution, thoughts are simply movements of atoms or something caused by

those movements, e.g. epiphenomenal happenings in the brain. There is no factor from outside this naturalistic picture to ensure that our internal cognitive structures map correctly to the external world and thus would produce true beliefs about that world (as opposed merely to help us display danger-avoidance behaviour for survival). But, according to Plantinga, *theism has an answer. God creates us in his image, part of which means to be rational persons with cognitive mechanisms producing mostly true beliefs when in the suitable environment.

In many ways, we would know nothing without our experience. Plantinga states that there is even an empirical or phenomenal aspect to our knowledge of necessary and abstract truths such as mathematics and *logic. However, 'wondering whether our experience produces justified belief, i.e. wondering whether our experience is at base reliable, has an objective and a significant subjective component. Objectively, either it is largely reliable or it is not. If it is not largely reliable, then there is no way out of this predicament. It appears to be largely reliable, and to act otherwise in the community setting is to betray the very assuredness experience gives us. For example, to think it possible that my son is not of human descent, and that he is older than his father, in the ordinary meaning of those terms, is incredible and philosophically untenable, but in some broadly logical sense possible. But the subjective side of the issue intersects at this point with the objective: I am as sure as a knower of most truths I can name that I have a son, and that my son is younger than I am by virtue of my evident and undeniable experiences (e.g. seeing him being born and watching him mature ever since on more or less a daily basis). There is a temporal and spatial continuity to this event of seeing and knowing my son that is objectively and subjectively undeniable. And it was evidently designed that there would be no other reasonable way for me to know these facts than through experience and reflection. There are many conditions for such knowledge (memory, consciousness, reflection, etc.). That these conditions could be doubted, individually or severally, is true, but that it is rational to doubt their truth-conduciveness is not true.

Thus, our attitude as Christians towards the truth of the deliverances of our senses should be thanksgiving. We receive it as an evident gift from God the creator and designer of our

senses. God has so designed us that through experience we come to know his world and the things necessary for salvation and life with him. Thomas *Reid remarks that all of the objective components that contribute to our knowing come out of the same shop, i.e. there is an integrity or wholeness in the mechanisms of human cognition that is admirable and wondrous.

It is acceptable to maintain that our considered Christian *epistemology must combine elements of *rationalism and empiricism. In *Critique of Pure Reason* Immanuel *Kant was right when he said that concepts without experiences are empty (useless), and experiences without concepts are blind (undirected). God has so ordered our minds to make sense of our experience. The process of God getting his propositional *revelation to us is largely empirical (transmission of the text, the act of reading). Clearly, however, there are Christian sources of rational beliefs not fully traceable back to experience taken alone (the act of inspiration of Scripture, the act of regeneration, the internal testimony of the *Holy Spirit, mystical experience, *miracles, sense of the divine love, near-death experiences), since God himself is a nonphysical spirit. Even if we look at human epistemology naturalistically (e.g. through the notion of proper function, following Plantinga), it is reasonable to believe that experience is a reliable and justified source of knowledge only if it flowers within a supernaturalistic *metaphysics.

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E. N. MARTIN

ENLIGHTENMENT, THE

Like many labels for periods of history, 'the Enlightenment' was introduced by historians to express an estimation of the value of what they identify as an 'era'. Like the term 'Renaissance', but unlike the 'Middle Ages' or the 'Dark Ages', 'the Enlightenment' has stood for a movement in thought and culture that some modern historians have looked upon favour-

ably. They did so because this movement challenged the *authority of religious tradition and celebrated the value, goodness and virtues of human nature, looking to modern *science to secure human progress over ignorance and superstition. The Enlightenment is often delimited from the late 1600s to the end of the 1700s, but there is no universally accepted way to date the period. The closest one can come to a historical summary of Enlightenment thought is Immanuel *Kant's (1724–1804) dictum that 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! Have courage to use your own understanding! That is the motto of enlightenment' (Kant, p. 85).

In addition to Kant, key figures who are often seen as champions of the Enlightenment include Michel de Montaigne (1533–92), John *Locke (1632–1704), Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), François Marie Arouet de *Voltaire (1694–1778), David *Hume (1711–76), Denis Diderot (1713–84), Adam Smith (1723–90), and Baron de Holbach (1723–89). Sometimes, René *Descartes (1596–1650), Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Benedict de *Spinoza (1632–77) are included as members of this group. Many of these thinkers may be seen from today's perspective as having truly made an enduring, positive impact on European culture and beyond. Certainly their opposition to religious intolerance and persecution is significant and the pursuit of intellectual freedom by opposing excessive censorship is important. Moreover, the Enlightenment ushered in a level of critical reflection on religion which produced masterpieces in both the case for and the case against religious belief. Of the figures named, Locke articulated and defended a vital role for Christianity in culture and politics; Holbach and Diderot wrote polemics against religion, as did Voltaire, though Voltaire's work was often more anti-clerical than anti-theistic. Enlightenment thinkers like Voltaire commended a natural religion that recognized God and an afterlife but shunned special providence, scriptural authority and *miracles. Hume and Kant delivered systematic critical treatments of the classical theistic arguments, though Hume may be interpreted as a