

General Thoughts on "Truth" (At least in terms of Justice)

Post by "Cassius" of April 23, 2018 at 2:58 PM

Vatican Saying 33: "There never was such a thing as absolute justice, but only agreements made in mutual dealings among men in whatever places at various times providing against the infliction or suffering of harm."

Is it not clear that this conclusion follows directly from there being no god, no center of the universe, no absolute point from which someone can stand and say THAT, and ONLY THAT, is "correct?"

Of course that doesn't finish the point, and leads next to the question "if not absolute justice, then what 'justice' is there at all?"

And it seems to me that is just a subset of the "truth" issue: If not absolute truth, then what 'truth' is there at all?

It seems to me that the Epicurean answer to that is that "truth" to us is that which we perceive through our senses, and through our faculty of pleasure and pain (which aren't strictly the same thing as the senses), and our faculty of "preconceptions/anticipations."

Unfortunately there is not much text to explain what the third one means, and some are going to say that preconceptions and anticipations are nothing more than conceptions formed after thinking about past experiences. But just as "pleasure" and "pain" are to at least a large degree "preprogrammed prior to experience, I believe the direction DeWitt suggests is correct, and that humans (no less than dogs or cats or other animals) are born with genetic characteristics that dispose them to recognize abstractions in particular ways. However I would differ from DeWitt in calling these "innate ideas" - I don't think it is "content" or "propositions" that are genetically encoded, but the "principles of operation" or the "disposition to process abstractions in particular ways" (like a computer operating system) that is genetically provided.

At this stage of the argument I regularly cite [Jackson Barwis in "Dialogues on Innate Principles"](#) arguing against the "blank slate" of Locke and Aristotle:

Here is a section of "[Dialogues on Innate Principles](#)" most directly related to this [Note: bold emphasis added by me, and of course the reference to a Divine Creator is not necessary to the argument]:

"... When I take a general view of the arguments adduced by Mr. Locke against innate moral principles; and when I see what he produces as the most indisputable innate principles, "if any

be so," I am inclined to think there must have been some very great mistake as to the true nature of the things in question: **for he lays down certain propositions (no matter whether moral or scientific, so they be but true), and then proves that such propositions, considered merely as propositions formed by our rational faculty, after due consideration of things, as all true propositions must be, are not innate. Nothing more obvious!** But surely those whom he opposes must, or ought to have meant, (though I cannot say I have read their arguments, nor do I mean to answer for anyone but myself) not that the propositions themselves were innate, but that the conscious internal sentiments on which such moral propositions are founded were innate.

He looked on me, interrogatively.

I said it might be so, and that I saw a great difference in those things.

Or perhaps, continued he, the mistake may have arisen from following too closely the mode, in which it is necessary to proceed, in order to acquire a knowledge of certain sciences, as in geometry: that is, by laying down some clear and self-evident axioms or rational propositions. But even here it should be remembered that, in the natures of things, there were principles which had existence anterior to the formation of these axioms or propositions, and on which they are founded, and on which they depend for their existence: as, extension and solidity.

I gave an assenting inclination of the head.

I cannot, therefore, conceive, added he, that what we ought to understand by innate moral principles, can by any means, when fairly explained, be imagined to bear any similitude to such propositions as Mr. Locke advances as bidding fairest to be innate, nor to any other propositions. That is, I cannot conceive that our innate moral principles, our natural sentiments, or internal conscious feelings, (name them how you please) which we derive, and which result, from our very nature as creatures morally relative, are at all like unto any propositions whatever.

Who can discover any similitude to any conscious sentiment of the soul in these strangely irrelative propositions:

"Whatever is, is."

"It is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be." ?

Nobody.

The innate principles of the soul, continued he, cannot, any more than those of the body, be propositions. They must be in us antecedently to all our reasonings about them, or they could never be in us at all: for we cannot, by reasoning, create any thing, the principles of which did not exist antecedently. We can, indeed, describe our innate sentiments and perceptions to each other; we can reason, and we can make propositions about them; but our reasonings neither are, nor can create in us,

moral principles. They exist prior to, and independently of, all reasoning, and all propositions about them.

When we are told that benevolence is pleasing; that malevolence is painful; we are not convinced of these truths by reasoning, nor by forming them into propositions: but by an appeal to the innate internal affections of our souls: and if on such an appeal, we could not feel within the sentiment of benevolence, and the peculiar pleasure attending it; and that of malevolence and its concomitant pain, not all the reasoning in the world could ever make us sensible of them, or enable us to understand their nature.

I do not see that it could, said I.

Every being in the universe, continued he, must receive its principles from the Divine Creator of all things. The reason of man can create no principles in the natures of things. It will, by proper application, enable him to know many things concerning them which, without reasoning, he never could have known; and to explain his knowledge, so acquired, to other men; but the principles of all created beings are engendered with, and accompany, the existence which they receive from their Creator. And in a point so truly essential as that of morality is to the nature of such a creature as man; God has not left him without innate and ever-inherent principles. He has not left to the imbecility of human reason to create what he knew it never could create, and what we know it never can create.

Even in the abstracted sciences of arithmetic and geometry, reason can create no principles in the natures of the things treated of. It can lay down axioms and draw up propositions concerning numbers, extension, and solidity; but numbers, extension, and solidity existed prior to any reasoning about them.

And here I must observe that the assent or dissent that we give to propositions in these sciences, which are but little interesting to our nature, is drawn from a source widely different from that which we give to moral propositions. Thus, when we are told that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, and see the demonstration; we say simply, true. That they are equal to three right angles; false. These things being irrelative to morals, they move no conscious sentiment, and do therefore only receive our bare assent or dissent as a mere object of sense; in the same manner as when we say a thing is, or is not, black or white, or round or square; we use our eyes, and are satisfied.

But the truth or falsehood of moral propositions must be judged of by another measure; through a more interesting medium: we must apply to our internal sense; our divine monitor and guide within; through which the just and unjust, the right and wrong, the moral beauty and deformity of human minds, and of human actions, can only be perceived. And this internal sense must most undoubtedly be innate, as we have already shown; it could not otherwise have existence in us; we not being able, by reasoning, or by any other means, to give ourselves any new sense, or to create, in our nature, any principle at all. I therefore think Mr. Locke, in speaking of innate moral principles, ought, at least, to have made a difference between

propositions relative to morals, and those which have no such relation."