

Dubitable Elements in Our Knowledge

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1. It is indubitable that there are dubitable elements in our knowledge. Few thinkers will be willing to claim that the dubitable elements are less numerous than the indubitable ones. Doubt, uncertainty, unintelligibility, and limitations of all sorts constantly accompany our thoughts. If this is the case, can there be a *philosophia perennis*, is then a metaphysics possible, and of what kind?

An easy way out of the problem would be to conclude that, in view of the very imperfect mode of our knowledge, there is no possibility of a *philosophia perennis* with all its consequences. To accept this conclusion would be to renounce an essential element in the motivation of man's striving for knowledge, namely, the desire for certitude. Moreover, this would not really be answering but renouncing the problem. Neither will it help to claim on the mere basis of the persistence of some systems of philosophy throughout the centuries, that there is an unchanging body of timeless knowledge.

The first and major difficulty in the discussion of the nature of metaphysics is the clear definition of the problem itself. What actually is uncertain, what has to be elucidated? We will not be able to answer this question until we define the terms in which the problem is stated. In the first place, we must be clear as to the meaning of the notion of "metaphysics." There are many systems called metaphysical. Are we going to use the term "metaphysics" as a genus embracing all these systems, or shall we make it, for the purpose of the present discussion, more specific and identify it with a particular system, say Thomism? Let us for the sake of simplicity accept the second alternative. Moreover, let us assume that Thomistic metaphysics is a complete, univocally, and definitely determined system. We suppose that all notions and all affirmations (theses) of this system have a clear, unambiguous, unchanging meaning, excluding all uncertainty and all controversy arising from different interpretations. In other words, we suppose that there is no possibility of conflicting interpretations of the system, nor any need to extend or to elaborate the system.

After this preliminary delineation of the term "metaphysics," let us inquire what it is that we want to elucidate. Do we intend to consider metaphysics with regard to the objective world or in relation to the sum total of knowledge? There is change and constancy in both areas. Of course, the proper understanding of the latter statement will require a clarification of the terms: "change" and "constancy." The fact is that the subject-matter of philosophic knowledge is composed of two basic elements: The world and existing knowledge. We suppose that change in the world results in what Teilhard de Chardin calls "complexification" of beings, but we do not know whether this is synonymous with an increase

of the total plurality of beings or not. Maybe the sum total of beings, and of perfections, evolution notwithstanding, is constant. Change and constancy, then, would be two co-existing aspects of being.

Whether this is so or not, it is certain that the sum total of knowledge is constantly expanding. Because of that, *the subject-matter of philosophy is not static but dynamic, changing and growing*. The question is whether the growth of the subject-matter affects philosophy substantially or only accidentally. To answer this question one way or another would presuppose an adequate knowledge of the future development of knowledge, in fact, of the future of mankind. Who would dare to give such an answer? It may very well be that not only the quantity but also the quality of knowledge will evolve.

If the latter eventuality were ever to occur, would present metaphysics lose its value so as to be in need of either being replaced by a totally new system or require serious alterations and additions? It would be very tempting to answer in the affirmative, but would the answer be true? Besides, any answer to this question may involve a petition of principle. Shall we, therefore, refuse to deal with the problem? Not necessarily. Several other questions, logically prior to the one just mentioned, should be answered in the first place. It may well be that they may throw some light on the problem.

2. The discussion of the status of metaphysics is essentially a discussion of the nature and the value of knowledge in general. Does knowledge represent extra-mental reality at all and if so, to what extent? At the basis of metaphysics, there is always a theory of knowledge. In turn the theory of knowledge depends to a large extent on the ideas which we hold about the nature of physical things. If we agree with Heraclitus that the essence of reality is change, then there is no ground for abstract, stable, universal notions. Consequently the order of concepts, i.e. of thought, is either an illusion or in any event is entirely subjective. In either case it does not represent objective reality. What is worse, absolute mobility, the Heraclitean being, is not perceptible either, contrary to what Heraclitus himself or anybody else might have thought. Change is perceived only in relation to something stable. Absolute change, which excludes any form of stability, cannot be perceived. The question is whether it can exist. Only one answer is possible, a negative one. Absolute change is not only unthinkable and imperceptible, it is impossible.

For the existence of some kind of knowledge, there must exist some kind of stability. On the other hand, in order that there be any being at all, there must be something which persists through the change unchanged. Only then change can exist and be perceived. Not only must there be some permanence, but determination as well. Without it, neither being nor change would be possible. If there is determination in the external reality, then there exists an objective foundation for and justification of concepts.

One may wonder whether this conclusion is synonymous with the affirmation of the existence or even the possibility of metaphysics. Not exactly. It leaves the question open as to whether a definite system of

metaphysics can be formed or not. Nor can we deduce from the very fact of the existence of determination, that there is evolution, or that there is not, and if there is, then of what kind. There is, however, one conclusion which can be formulated: whether there is evolution or not, the existence of determination, i.e. of a formal element, justifies affirmative judgments and consequently makes intellectual knowledge possible. Whether this knowledge can be a knowledge of the essential type as required by (Thomistic) metaphysics is another question.

The answer to this latter question will require a discussion of several presuppositions underlying the notion of metaphysics. At this juncture we shall mention some of them. It is usually assumed that knowledge of essences is possible, further that this knowledge, at least in some instance, is adequate, i.e. definitive and, therefore, that it is stable. Moreover essential knowledge is identified with indubitable cognition, and thus becomes synonymous with certitude.

The first presupposition, of Parmenidean-Platonic origin, concerning the possibility of the knowledge of essences, is a *conditio sine qua non* of metaphysics. We shall accept it for the time being, and discuss the second one, namely, that this knowledge is definitive, therefore that it is stable. It may be worth mentioning that the second presupposition is not synonymous with the first. Contrary to what could be thought, the notions of definitiveness and of stability are not univocally determined. They may be considered absolutely or within a given context. For instance, the definition: "man is a rational animal" may be said to be definite absolutely, i.e. independently from the system in which it appears, or, relatively, within the system of the Aristotelio-Thomistic metaphysics. It would be wrong to declare meaningless, or of no value, the second alternative of definitiveness. We now know that the context which is a system of meanings, also known as a "language," plays an important role in determining the meanings of elements which are part of it. Moreover, all definitions always belong to a system and, with the exception of axioms, imply some presuppositions. A classical illustration may be found in definitions of Euclidean geometry.

Contrary to the traditional opinion, one can argue that the definition "man" and "rational" cannot be made once and for always, as long as our knowledge progresses. Would this argument deny the essential nature of the definition? This is a crucial question. A denial, in this context, of the essential nature of the definition would be equivalent to a denial of the possibility of traditional metaphysics. An opposite answer would leave a chance for the existence of a metaphysics. The interpretation of such a metaphysical system would, of course, have to be different from that of the traditional one. Metaphysics would have to be understood as a type of dialectical knowledge, progressing, by ever more precise approximations, towards the ultimate goal of definite knowledge. It may be worth mentioning that it is not necessary to consider this dialectic as being of the Hegelian type.

The problem whether dialectical metaphysics does or can exist, cannot be solved in the context of a non-dialectical metaphysics. Can it at all be

solved? The only way to deal with this problem is to analyze the development of knowledge and try to find out whether our understanding of essences has increased or not. In problems, like this one, the real difficulty lies not so much in imagining an answer as in proving the answer. Contrary to situations encountered in empirical sciences, we lack here an objective criterion of verification, such as the process of measurement. Consequently, whatever answer we may venture to give, it will meet with objections and with counter arguments. It would be futile, in either case, to try to explain these objections away.

Whether it is true or false, that dialectical metaphysics exists or may be developed, it is certainly true that human knowledge as a whole, develops and progresses. This development is made possible by the combined intellectual capacities of affirmation and of doubt. The more fundamental a problem is, the more problematic are its solutions, and the more difficult is the proof. Paradoxical as it may sound, the indetermination surrounding essential problems of knowledge does not seem to hinder the progress of rational knowledge, and yet, at the same time, is a limit beyond which reasoning cannot go.

Shall we therefore conclude that the identification of essential knowledge with indubitable cognition is false and without foundation? The answer is not clear. Thus far, we have not analyzed the notions of indubitability and of dubitability. It becomes now necessary, in order to further the discussion, to say at least a few words about these two notions. Since they are relative to each other, we must consider them together.

When and why is an element of knowledge dubitable? At the first glance, it would seem that dubitable means uncertain, obscure, nonevident, in general the opposite to clear and distinct ideas. We know how much Descartes was mistaken in his belief in the possession of infallible knowledge. The very notion of evidence, to which that of indubitability may be reduced, is neither simple nor very clear. In the first place we have to distinguish between sense evidence and intellectual evidence, then between real and false evidence. There is no necessary connexion between sense evidence and intellectual evidence. From the former, the latter does not result automatically. Otherwise perceiving would be synonymous with understanding. Nor is the opposite true. The perfection of logical structure in a reasoning process is not the guarantee of the truth of the conclusion.

The notion of dubitability is relative to that of indubitability. Because of this relation one may wonder whether the distinctions just mentioned in the discussion of evidence are not, as well, found in the case of dubitability. If this were so, then we would have to conclude that there are two levels of dubitability. Moreover, to the distinction of true and false evidence should correspond an analogical one of dubitability. This distinction is rather surprising because it indicates that we may be mistaken not only as to the evidence but also as to the dubitability of an element of knowledge.

Whether this is so or not, the important fact to retain for the discussion of the nature of metaphysics, is the relativity of the notion of dubitability. Doubt presupposes affirmation, i.e. some sort of evidence. One can doubt

only that which is known. The proposition: "everything is doubtful" is a contradiction in terms. What effect may this have on the problem of metaphysics? Does it justify the existence of traditional metaphysics? Again one has to withhold the answer. In the first place, it is necessary to discover what consequences follow from the necessity of the existence of indubitable elements in our knowledge. Is their existence itself a proof of the existence or of the possibility of a demonstrative system of essential knowledge? To answer this question, one has to consider the nature of the indubitable elements. To the two levels of evidence correspond two types of indubitability: empirical and intellectual. The former refers to sense-data and through them to the order of objective reality; the latter to the realm of logic, and to its necessary, perfectly determined relations.

Metaphysics, by definition, is the science of being. The indubitability which counts for this science in the first place, is that which is found in the knowledge of external reality, i.e. empirical indubitability. What is and will remain empirically indubitable in spite of change and evolution in the world and in the realm of knowledge? It will be, first of all, the affirmative certitude of being, then of change and of permanence, of the existence of determination and of indetermination, of similarities and of differences. Are these certitudes sufficient to justify a traditional type of metaphysics? It depends to a large extent on how elaborate we want this system to be.

One is allowed to wonder whether empirical indubitability extends beyond the basic generalities. If one tried to justify a more complex system through the use of logically perfect forms of reasoning, i.e. through intellectual indubitability, then one would be faced with a dilemma. It would be necessary either to give the ontological justification of intellectual indubitability, or to accept, with idealists and empiricists, the independence of analytic judgments, with all the consequences which follow the radical distinction of judgments into empirical and analytic.

At every stage of development of knowledge, the sum total of available knowledge is composed of some indubitable elements and a majority of dubitable ones. It must be understood that these two kinds of elements co-exist in a dialectical relationship. The meanings of elements of one kind are not fully intelligible without that of the other kind. They are interdependent, and cannot be artificially separated without losing part of their meaning. There exists therefore a permanent conflict between the necessity of classification of concepts and their interdependence, between the need of constancy of meanings and the constant enrichment of knowledge.

Can traditional metaphysics be justified in this context? The meaning of this question itself may be subject to dialectical development.

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