

KNOWLEDGE AS REVELATION.

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“IT is more important”, writes A. N. Whitehead, “that a proposition be interesting than that it be true”.¹ As Whitehead expounds it the dictum is valid; but taken out of its context it sums up one of the most pestilent of heresies. Not only Hitler and Stalin but propagandists in all ages have assumed that men should accept as knowledge certain propositions which stirred their emotions and guided their thoughts and actions. Men’s right and duty to seek truth as such were consequently either definitely flouted or speciously frustrated. The results of this attitude towards knowledge have been, not merely false or questionable beliefs, but the degradation of truth to a means of attaining political or other extraneous ends. The unprecedented use of old and new forms of propaganda in our own day has made the manufacture of opinions one of our foremost industries, and few of us are wholly immune from its effects.

We are to some extent predisposed to tolerate this industry because we live in a largely man-made world and put our trust in our own power and cleverness rather than in obedience to the world order and its demands. In imagining that we can subject things to our purposes without listening to what they tell us, we are guilty of what the Greeks called *ὑβελς*, and Bertrand Russell calls “cosmic impiety”. One form of this sin against reality is our tendency to think of knowledge, not as revealed to us by the things about which we learn, but as a product of our own activity, an instrument we forge for our own advancement.

Our pride in the knowledge we appear to gain by our own efforts has further led us to undervalue types of knowledge which are revealed rather than laboriously acquired, for example, our knowledge of personal worth or of beauty. We have taken

¹ *Adventures of Ideas*, p. 313.

the factual and scientific knowledge, of which the revelational aspect is less apparent, as the standard type to which, if they are to vindicate their validity, other types must conform.

Happily, these intellectual sins and weaknesses are now more clearly and widely recognised than ever before as diseases which call for remedial treatment. In the most varied fields, and not least in our schools, efforts are being made to encourage men and women and boys and girls to learn by their own experience what knowing really means. They find that they cannot effectively know persons and things unless they in some way live with them. For knowing is one aspect of the comprehensive activity of living. They therefore do not merely think of things as external objects, but interact with them by asking them questions and listening to their replies. They ask them, for instance, what is your importance for human life? and by understanding their answers gain value-knowledge of them. They come to realise also that in order to live rightly with things and truly know them, we must have insight into their intrinsic worth; we must, that is, have worth-knowledge of them.

The close connexion between living with things and knowing them is illustrated by G. F. Stout's example of what I do when I blow out a candle. My activity in living the situation then involves doing three intimately related things. In the first place, I interact with the external situation, with the result that it becomes a lived situation in which a candle is to be blown out. Both I and the situation are transformed by thus interacting.¹ On the one hand, I should live differently if the external situation were other than it is, and in my feelings I experience the difference the situation makes to me. On the other hand I convert the external situation into a lived one, and organise it from a particular stand-part.² If I wanted to read by the candle's light, the situation as I lived it would be different. Secondly, in order to live satisfactorily in the situation thus called into existence, I must know what activity on my part it demands in order that its possible value for me may be realised in actual

¹ For a discussion of the process, see B. Petermann: *Das Gestaltproblem*, esp. p. 230.

² See F. C. Bartlett: *Remembering*, p. 231.

fact. The situation is a system or pattern of actual and possible activities in which I and my fellow-members, such as the candle and the air, co-operate in effecting my purpose. Into this pattern what I do must fit by being co-ordinated with what my co-members do. I must not only blow ; I must blow hard enough in the right direction. If I am not to trust to luck, my blowing must be guided by a thought-pattern of the situation, which reproduces in my thinking the situation's pattern as it really is. I form this thought-pattern by asking the candle and the air : What will you do if I do so and so ? I ask this question, for example, if I give a trial puff. In reply they tell me how I must think of them as behaving, and I develop my thought-pattern by fitting in their replies. I then know what to do, and in the third place I do it.

The candle is a real object to me just because it tells me how I must think it ; for the same reason things like justice, or the Norman conquest, or even the ghost in *Hamlet* are in their own ways real. For if they are definite enough to be thought of at all, they have, as H. F. Hallett puts it, wills of their own. We cannot think of them in any way we like ; they dictate their own properties.¹ All knowledge is therefore in this sense a revelation made to us by the things we know.

Again, when I blow out the candle my getting to know the situation is one aspect of my whole life in it ; the kind of knowledge I want is determined by the particular kind of life I am trying to lead, or, roughly speaking, by what I want to do. Now we not only live in a great variety of situations, but we live them on what we may call different levels. A young child lives mainly by reflex and instinctive reactions to his environment. When he grows older he tends to live in situations in which his co-members have definite value for him. He thinks of things as friends or foes. At the same time he comes to live more and more in situations which have their places in the external world of actual and possible facts of which he must take account. Lastly, though not in order of time, he lives situations which have intrinsic worth. There may be something right to be done ; his mother is there to be loved and obeyed. In order

¹ *Philosophy*, vol. xx, no. 77, p. 236.

to live satisfactorily on these levels he needs corresponding types of knowledge. But he lives a situation fully only when he lives it on all levels at once ; though as a rule he lives it predominantly on one particular level. He therefore needs adequate knowledge of all four types, each of which plays an essential part in enabling him to live aright.

In the first place his whole life is based upon his reflex and instinctive responses to situations in which knowing is not clearly differentiated from feeling and striving. This elementary instinctive knowledge which his responses involve is not less essential than knowledge of higher types. Instinctive knowledge may be only a vague awareness of the situation's importance. If I lay my finger on a baby's hand, the hand clasps it and holds it tight, presumably without the baby being clearly conscious of what his hand does. But we often react in the same reflex way to situations of which we are more definitely aware. For instance, we shut our eyes when we see a fly near them. In rather more advanced activities our reflex reactions develop into instinctive responses of much wider range without, however, essentially changing their character.

In all reflex and instinctive responses we do something which the situation, as we experience or live it, tells us to do. Our body-minds are active in responding to its demands, and therefore conform themselves to its pattern. It is true that we do not reproduce that pattern in thought, and say to ourselves we must do so and so. Our thinking is still an inseparable aspect of our whole activity. Nevertheless, that activity is guided by our awareness of the situation as real in so far as it impresses its pattern upon us, or by what we may call our instinctive knowledge of it.

The character and function of instinctive knowledge are illustrated by experiments with rats learning to escape from a maze. A rat after many trials may find his way out and by practice come to take the right course without hesitation ; but we can hardly suppose that he forms a thought-pattern of the relevant part of the maze. He is, however, guided by instinctive knowledge of the pattern. as is shown by his taking the corners like a motorist who prepares to take a turn before he comes to

it. He does not determine his course from moment to moment by what he sees ; for if his familiar path is blocked, he runs head-on against the obstruction.

Instinctive knowledge has obvious limitations. It leads us to respond immediately to situations whose momentary importance we feel, but of whose wider meaning and implications we take no account. On the other hand, just because we do not definitely think of the situations as external and so do not view them from outside, we live them without our body-minds in a uniquely intimate way. We, so to speak, take root in them, and so gain a stable basis for our whole lives. A child lays the foundations of a healthy life in the instinctive intimacies of the home ; a community's common life ought to have the roots from which it draws its strength in the instinctive bonds of kinship and neighbourhood, such as we find in rural life at its best. Our urban and industrial civilisation is threatened by disaster and even dissolution because it loosens these bonds in their old forms and has not yet succeeded in renewing them in a modified shape. If the people perish for lack of knowledge, it is not least for lack of the instinctive knowledge which is one aspect of the organic togetherness with people and things from which right living must start.

Young children and primitive peoples live largely on the instinctive level ; but they live also in situations centering round definite objects of whose importance they are definitely aware.¹ They do not, we are told, think of things primarily as objects in the given external world, but as friends or foes, helpers or antagonists. This implies that the things with which they have to do are thought as active or even alive. A child's teddy bear is a live friend, and primitive animism is an extension of the same mode of thought. But when children and primitive men think of things as alive they do not necessarily think them as independent objects leading continuous lives of their own. Teddy ceases to rank as alive when his owner grows tired of him, and primitive hunters, we are told, cannot think of deer

¹ On the thinking of children and primitive man, see e.g. H. Werner, *Comparative Psychology of Mental Development*, and P. Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

as existing when they are not being hunted. At this stage of mental development an object's importance on a particular occasion is reproduced in thought by imagining it as alive in that specific situation. The thinker lives in a little personal world of things important for his own and his comrades' lives ; and outside that world things have no existence for him.

This mode of thought seems strange to us because we habitually transcend the limits of our personal worlds by living also in a wider external world of actual and possible facts whose reality does not depend upon their importance for us. This world of given facts forms a continuous and stable background and basis for the successive situations in which we live. For it is a coherent and comprehensive scheme of things in which we and all our co-members play our appointed parts. We have factual knowledge of situations in this world when our thinking reproduces their factual pattern viewed against its wider background.

These two ways of living and knowing a situation in the end imply each other and are connected aspects of the comprehensive activity of living. But one or other aspect should dominate our whole activity according to the type of situation in which we live. An astronomer observing the stars is bent on knowing the external physical universe and seeks and uses factual knowledge. He looks at the stars from outside ; he asks them : what are you doing in the given scheme of things ? and what makes you do it ? He listens to their answers without thinking of the practical importance of his discoveries. On the other hand a farmer needs much factual knowledge, but he does not think of his crops primarily as having their places in the external world ; he thinks of them as having value for him because they are themselves of value for life. He lives with them, taking pride in their well-being and trying to give them all their healthy growth demands. His attitude is not primarily that of mastering them by scientifically understanding them or shaping them for his own purposes ; it is rather one of co-operative fellowship with them inspired by his sense of their value.

We can roughly delimit the special spheres of factual and value-knowledge by saying that we gain and use factual knowledge

when living as members of the ordered world of actual and possible facts. Such knowledge is impartial and universally valid; it is fully developed at a later stage than value-knowledge because it demands a more complete transcendence of personal interests. But for that very reason it enables us to understand and increase our mastery over the external world. The world in which we live is not, however, simply one of ordered processes which we know as facts. It is also a world in which there is an upward movement towards higher and more varied activities, exemplified in biological evolution and social progress. Of this movement living creatures are at once the agents and the product. In so far as we live by playing our parts in the upward movement things have positive value for us when they help us to do so more fully, negative value if they obstruct us. Our business is to increase their positive value, and for that purpose we must think rightly about their importance for life, that is, have value-knowledge of them.

We need not dwell at length on the far-reaching effects of our increased factual knowledge in transforming the conditions under which we live. Stern experience and the dissemination of scientific patterns of thinking have combined to make us grapple with many problems by facing the facts they involve, and so discovering how the problems themselves demand to be solved. We are, that is, in some cases more ready to gain knowledge by listening to what things themselves reveal. But this truly scientific attitude is characteristic of the best minds among us rather than of the community as a whole. In a spirit of "cosmic impiety" we are apt to give heed to our own preconceptions and desires instead of finding out what things really tell us. The result is the wishful thinking which has been branded as our besetting intellectual sin.

Our preoccupation with factual knowledge has also led us often to underrate the importance of value-knowledge. We have got so much into the habit of dealing with things from outside in the light of our factual knowledge of them, that we hardly think of them as having value in themselves. We therefore do not ask them: Being what you are, how do you help or hinder life? and listen to their answer. Rather we ask ourselves, not

them : If we do so and so with these usable things, what results shall we get ? We thus gain factual knowledge of their utility ; but this is worlds apart from value-knowledge of the things themselves. It is the kind of knowledge possessed by the car-owner who knows where he wants the car to take him, but has no thought or care for the car itself ; by the workman who knows how to earn his wages, but takes no trouble about his job ; by the jerry-builder, and the manufacturer of trashy goods.

The evil effects of this impiety are only too apparent in our national life, and many efforts are being made to overcome them. The change of attitude which alone will enable us to gain the value-knowledge we need demands little less than a revolution in our habitual outlook on the world. It will, however, be brought nearer if more of us have directly to do with things whose value we appreciate. Dwellers in the country have opportunities of doing so denied to those living in the man-made world of urban and industrial civilisation. One problem is how to lead the business man or factory hand to feel the same respect for the things with which he deals as the farmer feels for his crops. A promising contribution towards the solution of this and similar problems is being made by schools that concentrate less on imparting factual knowledge as such, than on giving their boys and girls first-hand experience of things whose value they appreciate and on leading them to learn about other things in the same spirit. The Ministry of Education's recent pamphlet on *The New Secondary Education* is in effect a plea for more value-knowledge to vivify the factual knowledge which is equally essential.

Factual and value-knowledge, however, are not enough. We live not only as members of the phenomenal world and as heirs of the upward movement in it ; we live also in a world in which persons and things have intrinsic worth. The evolution of the world as the source and scene of life has brought it about that there are right things to be done, beautiful things to be enjoyed and made, and persons to be loved for their own sakes. We may differ about what things are good and beautiful and true, and about what persons claim our love ; but it is as much a part of men's normal life in the world to respond to the

intrinsic worth of certain persons and things as it is to interact with external objects. We know that our own lives are in varying measure intrinsically worth living. Were they intrinsically worthless all value and progress, all purpose and effort, would be delusions, and suicide the obvious means of escape from a world of tragic shams.

All conscious activity implies an underlying sense of the actual or possible worth of things. This sense is generally part of the vague background of our thoughts and feelings and efforts. In some situations, however, it inspires all our activities and determines our dominant attitude towards the situation and our co-members. We then do not try to master the situation, nor to increase its value for life ; rather we become absorbed in it without any thought of ourselves. We live in and for it in response to its overmastering claims, and gain what may be called living unity with it and with the objects to which its special worth is due. When a mother is tending her sick child, her activities are outward expressions of her self-identification with the child she loves. She lives in and for him, feeling his suffering and rejoicing in his returning health at least as keenly as if they were her own. The same attitude of living unity with persons or objects to whose worth we respond is exemplified by the workman bent above all things on doing a good job ; by the wholehearted supporter of some great cause ; by a man who speaks the truth at any cost ; by poets and artists, scientists and other thinkers in all walks of life, who unreservedly obey the call of truth and beauty ; and pre-eminently by the saints and martyrs of all religions.

We respond so wholeheartedly to the worth of things with which we have living unity that, as in our instinctive activities, our knowledge of them can hardly be distinguished from the feelings they arouse and the strivings they inspire. Our worth-knowledge of things cannot therefore be adequately expressed in words. For as soon as I make statements about anything I think of it as external. Teachers who ask their pupils : Why do you like this poem ? are apt to interrupt the wholehearted enjoyment of it. It follows that worth-knowledge cannot be communicated in the direct way in which we communicate

factual knowledge. It is one aspect of our living unity with things, and therefore comes to us as a direct personal revelation from the things themselves. We subordinate all we do to their claims and open our ears to what they say. A situation may tell us the one thing we must do. A man may inspire our love and admiration by showing us the man he is. We respond by new insight and deeper conviction, not merely by increased actual and value-knowledge. But factual and value-knowledge have their parts to play. For persons and things of worth are objects in the external world, and they reveal their worth by playing their part in it surpremely well. Our worth-knowledge of them must therefore be based on our factual and value-knowledge to which it gives deeper meaning. It may be figuratively described as the transformation of our thought-patterns of the bodies of things into thought-patterns of them as embodied souls.

We constantly help other people to develop worth-knowledge by telling them about the doings of persons and things that suggest to responsive minds the inward being or soul which these doings reveal. If I say : He gave his life for his friends, I state a fact ; but I suggest the man's intrinsic worth. We also often make statements which have symbolic but not factual truth in that they lead us to appreciate a thing's intrinsic worthy by describing what it would do and be if freed from the limitations of the world of actual and possible facts. When Wordsworth speaks of duty as the " stern daughter of the voice of God ", his symbolic language quickens our insight into the nature of duty by transporting us into a realm other than that of time and space.

Very early in life we begin to have worth-knowledge, for instance of our parents and of things as in themselves beautiful or right. As we grow older our worth-knowledge develops in close connexion with our other types of knowledge, from which it gradually becomes more definitely distinguished. Unless a child knew by personal experience what it feels like to be good or naughty, no amount of social approval or disapproval would give him the direct insight of worth-knowledge into the inherent rightness or wrongness of certain actions. He would only learn that to do certain things was advantageous, while doing other.

things would lead to undesirable results. While, however, a child could not know the real difference between right and wrong unless he had living unity with ethical situations, what particular things are known to him as right depends at first almost entirely upon his family's social standards and his value-knowledge of them. As he grows older, largely by his mother's suggestions, he comes to distinguish for himself between obedience to accepted standards and doing what itself calls to be done. By degrees he also learns to know the worth not only of particular persons and situations, but of patterns of life, wide purposes and ideals. His worth-knowledge then largely determines his whole outlook upon life, and just because it is so specifically worth-knowledge deepens the meaning of all he knows.

We can trace the same process of development in the progress of civilisation. But both in our individual lives and in the life of large and small communities the advance is generally very far from attaining its goal. In our own time and country we admittedly lack the worth-knowledge that would unify, stabilise and inspire our whole common life. We no doubt lack this vitally important knowledge primarily because we do not seek it. In our "cosmic impiety" we are so busy about our own affairs that we do not heed the call of things of intrinsic worth; in religious language, we do not listen to the voice of God speaking through our own experience and the world in which we live. But the call would sound more insistently in our ears if the development of our worth-knowledge had not lagged behind that of our factual knowledge. We have not yet learned definitely to distinguish the two types, but are often like children who confuse doing what mother tells them with doing what in itself is right. This confusion of thought has tended to weaken our faith in worth-knowledge as such. We ignore the fact that worth-knowledge is a personal revelation; and are apt to think it is discredited when the traditional standards assumed to be its authoritative source can no longer be accepted. In the field of religion some theologians have increased the confusion by claiming that certain doctrines are a high form of worth-knowledge, and yet must be known to be true because they are vouched for by the Christian churches.

Again, we have not been as successful in widening the range of our worth-knowledge as in extending the field of our knowledge of facts. Most educated people understand the meaning of evolution, even if they know little about the details of the process. But popular education in the schools and elsewhere does not lead to develop a wide outlook upon what have been called the eternal values, such as the fundamental principles of right action ; nor are we systematically encouraged to understand for ourselves the wider implications of such worth-knowledge as we possess. For example, we hear a great deal about religious instruction in schools ; but not many schools aim primarily at helping their boys or girls to develop their own theologies on the basis of their personal religious experience, enlightened, but only enlightened, by the wisdom of their teachers. We cannot, however, live as rational men and women, instead of as victims of irrational propaganda, unless our whole outlook is shaped by convictions which embody the knowledge gained by our personal experience of the intrinsic worth of persons and things.

If we think of the various kinds of knowledge, instinctive, scientific, value-knowledge and knowledge of the intrinsic worth of things, we see that knowledge is one main means by which we realise our membership of the wonderful world into which we are born. In spite of our weaknesses and sinful aberrations, and in manifold ways adapted to our needs, God calls us to live as His children by the revelations which His works convey. By reproducing the patterns of situations and their wider backgrounds our thinking embodies in our limited human way what we may symbolically call the thoughts of God Himself. The high office of knowledge is, in A. A. Milne's words, to help us to live the good life and to see into the mind of God. But in order that knowledge may fulfil its purpose we must not only widen its range and co-ordinate the messages it brings us ; we must also learn to reverence truth as the revelation of things as they really are and therefore of the supreme Reality to which they owe their being.

Though a mere tyro in these high matters I venture to suggest that recent discussions of the character and aims of scientific knowledge exemplify the conception of knowledge which I have

sketched in untechnical terms. Physical science is the most specific and developed form of factual knowledge, and, as Eddington and other scientists tell us, it looks at things so exclusively from outside that it does not ask what things are themselves like but what logical patterns are exemplified in the changes they undergo. "Our account of the external world", writes Eddington, "must necessarily involve unknowable actors executing unknowable actions. . . . The knowledge we can acquire is knowledge of a structure or pattern contained in the actions. Perhaps we may say that the differential equations in which this knowledge is embodied are elaborate statements of the same kind as the statement that $2x + 3x = 5x$, whatever x may be".

This abstract knowledge of the physical world's structure is revelational in that it is gained in the first place by observers listening intently to what the world tells them. When using their exactly measuring instruments they ask appropriate questions. Secondly, the observers interpret the answers they get by means of mathematical process strictly determined by the logical laws laid down by the world itself.

At the same time, the principle that we can know things only by living with them is illustrated by Milne's basing his reconstructed physics upon our experience of events as following each other in time. Moreover, scientific knowledge, however remote from our direct experience of the external world, enables us to predict verifiable facts. It therefore in the end widens and systematises that experience and so promotes our living with things.

Even this extreme form of factual knowledge, however, implies some value-knowledge of the advantage which gaining it confers. The physicist is concerned only with factual knowledge, but his activities are prompted by his sense of the value to himself and others of the work in which he is engaged. For the biologist value-knowledge is explicitly important. For while seeking factual knowledge, he deals with living organisms as possessing a reality and value of their own. He gains value-knowledge of them, for instance, by studying their life-histories.¹ Finally, the ultimate inspiration of seekers after scientific

¹ See J. A. Thomson and P. Geddes, *Evolution*, ch. viii.

knowledge is the call, in Milne's phrase, to see into the mind of God. So Einstein tells us that scientific religious feeling, a rapt amazement at the memory of natural law, is the strongest and noblest incitement to scientific research.¹ Scientific knowledge, that is, like all other factual and value-knowledge, in the end owes its deepest meaning to the worth-knowledge which it enables its votaries to attain.

¹ *The World as I See It*, p. 276.