

Essential Epistemological Questions

Franklin Merrell-Wolff

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There is a problem which I believe is worth our serious attention that I may present in the form of a question, namely, “In what degree or sense, if any, is a necessity for thought also a necessity for reality?” This introduces to us at once all of the problem which falls under the discipline of epistemology.

Let us look at what our question says. First, what do we mean by the necessity of thought? By this it is at once evident that it includes the whole of logic, the logic of Aristotle, the logic of the Buddhist logicians, which is very similar to the formal logic, the logic that is an evident part of mathematics, which was first brought to our attention by the work of Mr. Boole the mathematician, and the logical developments since that time.

But it includes more than this. It includes all of the problems of epistemology. How do the ideas of our conceptual thought relate to the world about? Are they true with respect to that world or are they only valid with respect to thought itself? The epistemological field includes such questions as this: “What is the nature and the meaning of truth?” [and] “Is truth a correspondence between idea and reality or is it perhaps in addition a matter of self-consistency in statements?”

There is also a third factor that bears upon the necessities of thought and that is its psychological relationships. We know as a psychological fact that different people form into different types in their practical means of cognition. It is known that there are those who acquire meaning through the presence of a visual image. They are called a visual type. There are those who acquire meaning through an auditory impression and who can find little meaning through a visual impression alone. And finally as a third form, there are those who acquire meaning through what is called a sort of pseudo-pronunciation—a motor-verbal type. Thus, for the latter, that which is seen does not arouse meaning easily, nor that which is heard, but the meaning is aroused through a pseudo-pronunciation. Each of these types has certain advantages and certain disabilities. The visual type for instance may have a very great skill in the field of spelling for instance, and it may lead to a form of memory which is known as the photographic type of memory, which in its more advanced development can lead to a photographing, as it were, of pages of literature without the actual reading of them at the time but which may be read later—a very positive advantage. But on the other hand, it may have the limitation that one is incapable of grasping an un-imageable abstraction. It is said that Bishop Berkeley, the philosopher, had such a form of imagery strongly developed, and he said it was impossible to imagine an abstract triangle, for instance, but on the other hand that every triangle had to be a particular triangle having particular properties, as indeed any particular concrete image would be specific. And this had an effect upon his generalizations philosophically.

This merely illustrates the point that the necessities which condition our thinking are considerable. They are logical, epistemological, and even psychological.