

Existential Judgment versus Spiritual Judgment

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This subject was introduced into my mind in connection with a discussion upon the occasion of producing the second tape¹ concerning the sentence in the Declaration of Independence which runs, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The critic raised the objection in this form: first, that this sentence was not a metaphysical statement since it was not produced by a metaphysician, but rather was part and parcel of a document produced historically by the discussions of men of various interests, that in order to bring together a common effort there was a process of compromise, of give and take, so that finally there was produced a relatively acceptable consensus. Indeed, it was pointed out that Thomas Jefferson himself was much disturbed by this sort of action and was considerably hurt by it. Therefore being the resultant of a typical political process of coming to a consensus, it did not have the authority of a metaphysical statement.

It occurred to me that here was manifested the difference between the circumstances and occasions, either historical, biological, psychological, or other, that bring forth a position, a statement, or even a work of art, and the value or significance of that position, that statement, or that work of art. I remembered then a discussion of the distinction between two types of judgment, one called existential and the other called spiritual, by William James in his first chapter in the volume *Varieties of Religious Experience*. The chapter is headed "Religion and Neurology."² The point here is that a distinction is to be made by the historical background, or the physiological state, or the psychological condition under which a formulation is made. If the conditions that actually existed were of a sort that represented a deviation from norm, or were of less than a noble type, then that affected in a pejorative sense the content of the statement or production that came forth from it. That is a position that has been maintained and, as William James pointed out in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, has been the basis for a pejorative valuation of all religious orientations and even of philosophic orientations by the medical materialist.

Now, with respect to the critic's position concerning the effect of the historic events which led to the formulation of the Declaration of Independence, I would make this rejoinder, that it was immaterial to me as to how the particular sentence which I was discussing came forth. All that was important was that the sentence existed and had been highly influential in American history. This sentence is metaphysical because it makes a reference to a metaphysical subject matter, namely, the Creator, or that which produced the humanity that is upon this earth. It may be a competent statement or it may be an

¹ See the audio recordings, "Political Problem," parts 1 and 2.

² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1912), 4.

incompetent statement. It may be justified or it may be unsound. But as a statement it is metaphysical in form and involves metaphysical assumptions. The critical position that notes the circumstances leading to the formulation of the Declaration of Independence as being only a kind of compromise between the interests and presuppositions of different delegates and therefore a normal political operation, has no bearing upon the validity of the propositions that came forth. They are either valid or invalid in terms of their own content. It would not matter to me if this sentence had been produced by Bertrand Russell's monkeys. As a footnote I will say that Bertrand Russell once made the statement that if a group of monkeys were given a bunch of typewriters and were to typewrite at random, not knowing what they were doing, and did so for an infinite period of time, then all of the literature of the world would be reproduced in that typewritten mass. No doubt, the vast mass of the conjunction of words and punctuation symbols would be a meaningless jumble, but on the basis of sheer chance, there is a certain probability that the plays of Shakespeare would come forth and also any other form of literature that exists, provided we grant an infinite time. And so if this particular sentence that I have been discussing was produced in that way, I would say it has no effect upon its meaningful value. All that was—is brought up in connection with the means by which it was produced is relevant only as existential background, is not generally relevant to the content of the sentence produced.

Another instance of the distinction between the existential fact, or the historic fact, on one side and the truth value of a proposition that came forth out of that situation is afforded in the case of the mathematician Henri Poincaré. Henri Poincaré was the outstanding creative mathematician at the time that I was in the academic world. He told of the background of creativity in an article which he contributed to the now defunct *Monist* magazine, a copy of which I have. He was working at the time upon an effort to prove that a certain type of mathematical function could not exist. He had worked for some time and had made no successful progress. But upon one occasion he had been dining in a restaurant and had taken a more than usual quantity of coffee. Then upon the moment of his stepping into his carriage, suddenly the problem was resolved and he in a brief time wrote up a proof to the effect that such and such a function *could* exist. It was a successful outcome. The fact that he at first thought it was an impossible function but proved to be a possible one was immaterial. It was just as satisfactory to prove that it could exist as that it could not exist. His concern was with the truth of the matter.

Now, if my critic were to proceed consistently along the line of his argument, he would have to say that the theorem was relative to the validity of drinking an excessive amount of coffee, that truth was conditioned by the coffee drinking; whereas, in point of fact, the validity of the theorem is determined by the formal proof of it. If the proof is made, we know it is true and the circumstances whereby it became possible to produce the proof are totally irrelevant. But the critic, consistent with his position, would have to maintain that drinking coffee was an essential part of the truth and the soundness of drinking coffee or the unsoundness of it would affect the soundness of the proof. Of course, this is ridiculous. Actually, the background for the inspiration was irrelevant as to the content of the theorem. A thesis or a theorem may be born under certain conditions, but the validity of that thesis or theorem is another matter all together.

As William James has shown, the medical materialists usually employ the criticism based upon existential background for the devaluation of religious experience and metaphysical insight. They do not generally employ it to disparage mathematical creation or the development of scientific, empiric theories, particularly biological and medical theories. Yet, as a matter of fact, existential background is a factor in all of these cases, and if the medical materialists were morally and intellectually consistent, they would have to employ the same methods in the interpretation of the products of all genius whether in the mathematical or the empiric, scientific fields. If their method of criticism were valid, they would have to apply this with respect to their own medical theories and discredit the theory if the theorist was in an unusual or abnormal physiological or psychological state at the time he brought forth the theory.

An example of the peculiarities of behavior that may be found with creative genius, there's a story told of a mathematician who was walking across a railroad bridge. He had in his hand a number of pebbles and was tossing them over into the water as he was walking deeply in his speculative thought. It suddenly occurred to him that he had an appointment and he took out his watch to see the time and then tossed the watch over with the pebbles into the water. Now, from the standpoint of the medical materialist, or the psychiatrist, this would be judged as abnormal behavior and that he was an individual that might need to be placed in an asylum. But, the point I wish to make is that while he was absent minded with respect to the actions of his hands in tossing over the pebbles and his watch, his mind was deeply present upon the subject matter of his cogitations and that the product of those cogitations is not to be valued simply by the consideration of his unusual outward behavior. In general, so far as I know, the medical materialists have avoided the criticism of mathematicians in this way, for the value of their product is far too evident, not only to other mathematicians who are most able to appreciate it, but to all men because as a result of mathematical discovery, structures and implements, and devices that are socially useful, are rendered possible by such cogitations. However, there is one case that is an exception to this general practice and this is found in a statement made by G. Spencer Brown which appears as a forward to Dr. John Lilly's [In] *The Center of the Cyclone*.³ In this statement he refers to a prominent psychiatrist who said that given the opportunity he would have treated Sir Isaac Newton with shock treatment. Now, Sir Isaac Newton was perhaps the greatest scientist in known history. He was working upon a vast cosmic problem, namely, that of the laws connecting the sidereal entities. In order to solve the problem, he had to produce a system of mathematics that did not exist. It was the infinitesimal and integral calculus, a creation that was also produced independently by Leibniz at about the same time; and then with this instrument he was enabled to make the most outstanding integration in all scientific history, and then he made contributions of the most fundamental sort in connection with the theory of light, and, finally, throughout most of his lifetime, he devoted himself to a religious subject matter.

Now, there are stories about peculiarities in his behavior. One is like the following: during the period of his greatest creativity upon the scientific subject matter, he was living with his sister, so I understand, and she was providing for his material wants. She was in the habit of preparing his breakfast and leaving it on the table since

³ John C Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).

Newton never knew anything about when he should eat, since he was engaged in his fundamental thought. He came down from his room and ate when he happened to remember that it was time to eat. On one occasion a friend came to see Newton, and the sister told him that Newton would come down eventually and left him in the room where the food was. The friend began to feel a little hungry so he nibbled at the food. Newton didn't come. He nibbled again, and ultimately ate the whole of it. Then after a time, Sir Isaac came down. He nodded to his friend, looked at the empty dishes, and remarked, "I thought that I had not eaten this morning, but I see that I must have."

Now, no normal human being would make a mistake like that. Here was something that from the medical materialist's point of view was pathological. And if he was consistent in his application of drawing a pejorative judgment from the behavior with respect to the content of the thought, he would have to disparage the whole of the Newtonian *Principia* because he behaved abnormally with respect to his breakfast. Of course the outrageousness of drawing such a conclusion is self-evident, but is not so evident in connection with those who have the peculiar qualities of religious genius; and in justice to the product of religious genius one must say that biological deviation, psychological deviation, abnormality of social behavior is totally irrelevant with respect to the value of the product that comes forth from such genius. It's the content and its worth for life here, or elsewhere, that is the important consideration. Does it produce contentment? Does it produce superiority of character, greatness of soul, generosity, richness in the consciousness, general happiness? Does it bring about a reconciliation with the universe and with the laws that govern being? These are the important questions, not the consideration of whether the behavior is the normal behavior of the philistine, not the consideration as to whether the individual's organism has the marks of statistical normalcy. These are only incidental considerations. For aught we know, the *numen* speaks only when the temperature is high or the heart beats slowly.

Further examples of the tendency among men to devalue statements or states of consciousness by a correlation of them with physiological or psychological conditions are afforded by a quotation from William James (this is found in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* on p. 10):

Perhaps the commonest expression of this assumption that spiritual value is undone if lowly origin be asserted is seen in those comments which unsentimental people so often pass on their more sentimental acquaintances. Alfred believes in immortality so strongly because his temperament is so emotional. Fanny's extraordinary conscientiousness is merely a matter of overinstigated nerves. William's melancholy about the universe is due to bad digestion—probably his liver is torpid. Eliza's delight in her church is a symptom of her hysterical [condition] constitution. Peter would be less troubled about his soul if he would take more exercise in the open air, etc. A more fully developed example of the same kind of reasoning is the fashion, quite common nowadays among certain writers, of criticizing the religious emotions by showing a connection between them and the sexual life. Conversion is a crisis of puberty and adolescence. The macerations of saints, and devotion of missionaries, are only instances of the parental

instinct of self-sacrifice gone astray. For the hysterical nun, starving for natural life, Christ is but an imaginary substitute for a more earthly object of affection. And the like.⁴

Event, circumstance, and occasion are no doubt the legitimate concern of the historian, of the physiologist, and of the psychologist, but the meaningful content of that which is produced is the concern of the philosopher and the poet.

There is a quotation from Immanuel Kant which has a bearing upon another phase of our present problem. This is the first sentence of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which in a way is the topical sentence for the whole of that large book. It runs this way, “No doubt all our knowledge begins with experience, but it does not therefore follow that all our knowledge comes from experience.”⁵ This would mean that with respect to part of our knowledge, experience is simply the occasion for bringing it forth, not the source of the knowledge. And this was a matter of very fundamental importance, for it had been found by the work of the empiricist philosophers that when you analyze the position that all knowledge comes from experience, we have only that which is now immediately presented to us from moment to moment, but no knowledge of any such thing as law or interconnection between events, no knowledge of principle whatsoever. On the other hand, Kant saw that this knowledge that brought in principle, law, logical connection, and other relationship, did not exist actively in the mind before experience. Experience, in other words, was not the cause of all our knowledge, but the occasion of some of it, that portion which is in the form of general conceptual statements. And he made this further observation, that percepts without concepts are blind and concepts without percepts are empty.⁶ Real knowledge, therefore, involved a combination of the two sources. There is thus the notion of occasion when something is born. The conditions that afford—make up the occasion are not to be viewed as the cause of that which is born, but simply the occasion, the circumstance with which the knowledge is brought forth.

Perhaps a word concerning the difference between occasion on one hand and cause, premise, antecedent, or ground on the other will be of help to us. I may illustrate this difference by referring to the case of the mathematician Henri Poincaré which was referred to earlier. The excessive drinking of coffee corresponds to occasion, but not to cause, premise, antecedent, or ground. The latter is the body of mathematical knowledge into which the theorem which was produced by Henri Poincaré fitted. It was the proof based upon the premise or antecedent which justified the conclusion of the theorem. That was wholly independent of the occasion, which was a psycho-physiological factor which led to its development as a conscious fact here in this world in which we live. This is a brief tape, but I think it handles a problem that may be of help to us. We can confuse these two factors which we may represent by cause, ground, premise, or antecedent on one side and occasion upon the other.

⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 10.

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Max Muller (New York: Macmillan, 1881), 1: “But although all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it arises from experience.”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 52: “Thoughts without contents are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”