

Popkin on Skepticism, Erasmus, Luther, etc.

The Central quarrel of the reformation was over the proper standard of religious knowledge. ("the rule of faith").

This dispute raised the classical problem of skeptical philosophy even before the rediscovery of the writings of the ancient Greek skeptics. The Greek skeptics called this problem the problem of the criterion of truth.

Sextus' philosophy was rediscovered, translated into Latin and published in the mid-sixteenth century.

In modern philosophy, the problem of the criterion was first raised in the context of theological disputes. Later, it was raised with regard to natural knowledge. This led to a general crisis about the possibility of objective knowledge.

Luther vs. Erasmus.

Luther was at first just another advocate of reform in the Church's *practices*. His first protests were over the sale of indulgences and about the extent of the Pope's authority. At first, Luther argued for reform on the basis of the Church's accepted criteria of truth: agreement with the decisions of Church councils, Papal decrees, etc. These arguments were in his 95 theses.

By the time of the 1519 Disputation at Leipzig and his writing of the *Appeal to the German Nobility* and the *Babylonish Captivity*, he made the further step of denying that the traditions of the Church and its Councils were the rule of faith.

Once he made this move, Luther quickly found that he had become the leader of a full-fledged intellectual revolt rather than just another critic of the corruptions of a decaying bureaucracy. He maintained that there could be doctrines that were true even though they had been condemned by Church councils. Moreover, the Pope cannot be the final authority on anything.

Instead, Luther argued that all Christians have the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in matters of faith. The authority of Scripture outranks all others, including that of the Pope.

(Quotes from pp 2, 3 in 16/17)

What one's conscience is compelled to believe on reading scripture is true. This is the exact opposite of taking the criterion of truth to be authorization by Church tradition. Thus, Luther denied the entire framework by which orthodoxy had been determined for centuries. This action leads to a powerful example of the problem of the criterion of truth:

By what criterion does one judge the *debate* over what shall be the criterion of truth? Does any answer to this question not lead to circular reasoning? To an infinite regress?

To defend some criterion C, one must supply evidence in its favor. But the value of the evidence must itself be based on some criterion. Both the traditionalists and the innovators face the same problem.

Luther attacked the criterion of traditional Church authority by pointing out that there were inconsistencies in its views.

The Church tried to show that unaided conscience is an unreliable guide in trying to determine the true meaning of scripture. Moreover, adopting Luther's criterion would lead to total anarchy and chaos. Indeed all sorts of novel beliefs sprang up in the aftermath of Luther's revolt, confirming this prediction. (Anabaptists, Unitarians, Quakers, Hutterites, Amish, etc.)

Erasmus was the first of the opponents of the reformers to offer a different way of opposing them. Rather than appealing to historical evidence, Erasmus attacked Luther's views on free will. He takes a generally anti-intellectual position in regard to religious doctrines, based on his dislike of rational theology. Given this stance, it is better to remain within catholic tradition. He appeals to the ancient academic skeptics on such complex issues as free will as long as scripture permits it. He is willing to submit to Church decrees, even without understanding them or the reasons given for the decrees. Some parts of scripture, he says are too ambiguous and obscure for human understanding.

So, he said, there is no point in disputing about something that can't be known clearly. How can Luther claim to have understood scripture correctly? The Christian fool is better off than lofty theologians in their endless wrangling. One will then at least live a true Christian life.

(Quote examples of difficult parts of the Bible)

Luther answered Erasmus by arguing that a Christian cannot be a skeptic. It is necessary to be certain of what one affirms. One affirms certain truths because one's conscience is completely convinced. Not all parts of scripture are hard to understand. The central ones are clear. There is too much danger in being skeptical and then relying on the judgement of the church. Erasmus' attitude of caution is not appropriate on this matter.

The Church in turn replied to Luther that the world is full of people who are convinced of the oddest views imaginable. Many are so fully convinced that they are willing to be persecuted and even killed for their beliefs. But it is impossible for all of them to be right.

Calvin works out the new criterion of religious truth in greater detail. The evidence of the truth of scripture is evidence that validates itself. This self-validating evidence is given by inner illumination through the Holy spirit to those chosen by God to receive it. Calvin refers to this process as Inner persuasion and maintained that it gives a complete guarantee of religious knowledge.

(Quote on double illumination, p. 9)

Criterion of religious knowledge = inner persuasion

Guarantee of the authenticity of inner persuasion = that inner persuasion is caused by God

Source of assurance that inner persuasion is caused by God = inner persuasion

Skepticism IV: The Influence of the New Pyrrhonism

Page 71: Veron's challenge to the Calvinists' claim that the bible itself is the infallible authority in all matters of faith: One may concede that the books of the Bible are Holy scripture and contain infallible truth. But how is one to know that *these* writings are genuine books of the Bible?

Veron's challenge was not made up out of thin air. There have been many versions and translations of the bible since ancient times. The original Hebrew manuscripts, written during the first and second centuries BC and the first century AD have been lost since ancient times. Until 1947 AD, when the so-called Dead Sea scrolls were discovered in the near east, the oldest known manuscripts of substantial portions of the Hebrew bible were no earlier than the ninth century AD. What remains of the rest is only copies of copies of copies. What is also available are copies of translations of the Hebrew old testament into other languages such as Greek, Syriac and Latin (done between 250 BC and the first and second centuries BC). No two of the thousands of extant Greek manuscripts are identical. In fact, no two of the Dead Sea biblical manuscripts are word for word the same. Even today, there are many different versions of the Bible. What differentiates them is not just matters of translation but issues of which writings may be included in it. For example, Protestant versions of the bible do not include certain books that are included in the Catholic versions of the Bible. Like other Christian theologians, Veron knew that Jewish scholars had disputed the authority of New Testament writings and Muslim theologians disputed the exclusion of the books of the Koran. That by itself was enough to enable him to pose the challenge.

Calvin's own position states that something other than scripture, inner persuasion, is the rule of faith. This claim directly implies the problem of how to distinguish authentic inner persuasion from madness, false enthusiasm, etc. How can one be certain that one's own inner persuasion is caused by God? Calvin apparently was sufficiently certain of his inner persuasion to sentence Michael Servetus to death by fire on the grounds of having committed the heresy of denying the doctrine of the Trinity.

Then there is the further problem of interpreting scripture. Even if one could know which writings are genuine, what could be the criterion that would enable us to identify correct from incorrect interpretations? One cannot use scripture itself to tell how to interpret scripture. That would be begging the question.

Calvinists may claim that interpretation can be done by using obvious logical inferences from the words that the bible contains. But where is the warrant for this approach to interpretation? The discipline of logic was articulated by Aristotle. But Aristotle was only a man? How can one put infallible trust in any man?

Du Moulin claimed that logic is not the invention of Aristotle or any other man but there is a natural logic in the human mind, which we naturally use without needing to learn any artificial subject. This claim was open to the objection that something so simple that even an ignorant peasant can use it can hardly be considered totally reliable. Even if the principles of natural logic are true, how can one be sure that one has applied them correctly? Veron never advocated total skepticism but only with regard to religious knowledge. Not that sense and reason are deceptive but the use of these faculties may lead to error in any particular case.

